Context

The Disease Surveillance & Response Unit in the Ministry of Health has been receiving several reports since Friday 6th February 2015 of clients from the Ramo Estate reporting to the Anse Aux Pins health center with itchy red rash which was linked to contacts with a certain hairy caterpillar.

An investigation by the Public Health Officers was conducted to assess the situation and to identify the possible causative agents. It was noted that there was infestation of a specific plant locally known as “tantan” with a specific caterpillar covered in hairs, yellowish in colour with black spots as per picture below. Several other districts since then have also reported sitting of such caterpillars. A public health officer who came into contact with the caterpillar also developed rash.

Figure 1: The caterpillar

Background

Some species of caterpillars have urticating hairs which can cause extreme itching, skin irritations and damage to eyes and the respiratory system. Contact with the stinging hairs of these caterpillars can lead to skin irritation and/or allergic reactions of the skin, mucus membranes or respiratory systems.

The species in question in Seychelles is yet to be characterised.

Transmission

- By being near to or in the general surroundings of infested bushes or trees. The hairs drift in the air and can be blown over a distance of 200 m.
- If the nests or caterpillars are touched.
- If work is being carried out and caterpillar hairs which are present on the ground are stirred up: e.g. by raking up leaves, mowing, or clearing up trimmings.

Signs and symptoms

- Extreme itching -causing a rash once having had contact with stinging hairs of the caterpillar. This can occur hours after contact, but may continue over several days.
- Redness, swelling, inflammation of the skin
- Inflammation of the conjunctiva and eyes
- Redness, aversion to light, swelling of the eyelids, inflammation of the inside of the eye
- Inflammation of the upper respiratory system
- Inflammation of the throat, swelling of the mucus membrane in the nose, bronchitis, asthma like symptoms, allergic shock reaction can also occur in extreme cases.

Immediate measures to be taken when affected

- Shower immediately, change clothes.
- Do not scratch
- Free possible contaminated areas of skin using adhesive tape.
- Contaminated clothes should be stored in an air tight container and washed separately at 60 °C, or even hotter.
- The affected areas can be treated with antihistamines.
- Should there be extreme itching or other symptoms consult your doctor immediately

Figure 2: Typical rash after exposure to the caterpillar.

Source:
- Ministry of Health, Seychelles, Public Health Authority
- http://www.waldwissen.net/technik/holzernetelarbeit/wsl_schmetterlingsraupen_brennhaare/index_EN