

# 'Poison cosmetics' are killing young girls

SOME young Kenyan women have been fatally poisoned by too much mercury in cosmetics.

This an Eastern African environmental Chemistry seminar was told by Nairobi Vice-Chancellor Joseph Mungai, who said some cosmetics used in Kenya contained more mercury than is acceptable in many countries.

"Because of lack of facilities to detect and control these cosmetics, we have exposed our young women to levels of mercury that are suitable only for elephants," he said.

And said the manufacturers argued that only cosmetics with large contents of mercury could lighten the skins of African women.

Prof. Mungai explained that mercury poisoning caused kidney failure. Leg swelling was one of the symptoms.

And he said mercury poisoning had been traced after cases of fatal kidney failure had been discovered in young women.

"After these deaths some of our girls have learned that it is better to stay alive than bleach their skins,"

# he said.

He quoted the manufacturers, however, as saying it was the duty of the Government to legislate on the level of mercury they should put in their products.

"But, if there is a safe level of mercury for one nation," he said, "ethically and humanely, that is the same for all."

He said that it was not a question of legislation but a question of considering that all human beings were entitled to the same quality of life.

On the environment, Prof. Mungai stressed the importance of preserving plant life. "All the food we eat and the oxygen we breathe comes from plants," he said.

He said that whoever destroyed plants was destroying the most important factor that sustained animal and human life.

And urged environmental chemists to find more efficient ways of detecting water and soil pollution. "We have the ability to prevent environmental problems; we only lack the will to do so," he said.

Referring to recent poisoning of dogs by aflatoxin contamination, Prof. Mungai said the presence of a substance called strontium in drinking milk should be tested.

"This problem has been worrying many countries. . . we should not wait until we have a crisis," he said.

Prof. Mungai said 90 per cent of rural people were unable to store grain free of aflatoxins. "This is a common poison and causes many deaths to people and animals."

The 10-day seminar is being attended by participants from Burundi, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Kenya,

Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and Zambia, and is being conducted by Nairobi University chemistry department chairman Prof. S. O. Wandiga.

Talking later to the NATION about mercury poisoning, Prof. Mungai said most of the toxic cosmetics were imported.

Local manufacturers interviewed denied they used mercury in their products.

East African Industries Ltd. company secretary Daniel Gachukia said: "It is the policy of this firm never to use mercury in our products." He said it was an established fact among chemists that mercury was poisonous.

An official at Colgate Palmolive Ltd. said his firm was not manufacturing skin-lightening cosmetics.



PROF. Mungai opens the environmental chemistry seminar yesterday.