

## OBJECTIVE

Potassium hydroxide is a strong base with numerous applications. Misuse and underestimation of the dangers can lead to severe caustic burns. We describe the process leading to the withdrawal of a product containing a caustic concentration of KOH due to inappropriate labelling.

## RESULTS

Since 2010, we identified cases of caustic burns with a product called "destructeur total – totaalbestrijder", containing up to 10% KOH. It was de facto presented as an "ecological" herbicide. The herbicide action was suggested by the suggestive trade name and by the label showing a man applying the product on weeds using a backpack sprayer, without any protective clothing. The label mentioned the words "ecologic", "without pesticides", "under plantations" and showed a ladybird. The product had not been authorized as a herbicide. The competent federal ministry was informed and the product was withdrawn from the market for infraction to the pesticide regulation.



The manufacturer reintroduced virtually the same product on the market as a cleaning agent for stone terraces under the name of "total clean", fulfilling all legal obligations (*the symbol of danger "corrosive" and the appropriate R-phrases were placed on the backside*). The front label was virtually unchanged. We kept on identifying cases and advocated to take action against the product for two reasons: 1° although complying with the regulation, the front side label suggests an innocuous product 2° application of a caustic by backpack spraying poses unacceptable risks through mist drift and through manipulation risks, e.g. leakage or hose fitting failure.

Finally, since November 2012, a Ministerial Decree in preparation aiming to remove the product from the market\*. From January 2010 to November 2012 we recorded 7 exposures. This resulted in four cases of 3rd degree caustic skin burns on the back (2), the leg (1) and on the fingers (1). The remaining three had significant ocular (2) and dermal exposure (1), but were lost to follow-up.



## CONCLUSION

The toxicovigilance of the Belgian Poison Centre led to the withdrawal of a caustic product due to inappropriate labelling. We advocate against the use of caustics as cleaning agents. Caustic products should not be presented as innocuous even if they comply with the regulations.

\*published on 14 december 2012:  
[http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/mopdf/2012/12/14\\_2.pdf](http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/mopdf/2012/12/14_2.pdf)