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## Steam inhalation and paediatric burns during the COVID-19 pandemic

Steam inhalation is traditionally used as a home remedy for common colds and upper respiratory tract infections. The evidence base of the practice is weak, with unproven theories that the steam loosens mucus, opens nasal passages, and reduces mucosal inflammation, or that the heat inhibits replication of viruses.<sup>1,2</sup>

Scald injuries are the commonest cause of burns in children. Every day, more than 100 children present to the emergency department with burn injuries in the UK.<sup>3</sup> Since lockdown measures were implemented

last month, our Burns Centre at Birmingham Children's Hospital, Birmingham, UK, received a 30-fold increase in the number of scalds directly resulting from steam inhalation. The mechanism is most frequently accidental spillage of boiling water from a bowl or from a kettle. Children have occasionally been left unsupervised.

On average, our unit admits two patients per year with scalds related to steam inhalation. Over the past month alone, we have admitted six children with burn injuries due to this mechanism, with the youngest child aged 2 weeks, and the most severe case involving 8% of the child's total body surface area, requiring excision and skin grafting.

We surveyed Burns Services across England. With an 86% response rate, we found that 50% of centres have had an increase in scalds relating to steam inhalation. This correlated with regions of England with higher prevalence of COVID-19 (London and South East; West Midlands; North West). Two thirds of centres reported an association with Asian ethnicity (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Other).

The common misconception is that steam inhalation is beneficial in preventing and treating respiratory tract symptoms. Social media and home-made tutorials from unverified sources have a role in misleading parents into practising this dangerous habit.

Studies have shown that there is no additional symptomatic relief from the use of steam inhalation therapy to treat the common cold.<sup>1,4</sup> However, a survey of general practitioners in 2016 showed that 80% of general practitioners have recommended steam inhalation as a home remedy to their patients.<sup>5</sup>

Steam inhalation is a hazard to children. Resulting scalds can ultimately lead to hospital admission, surgery, and life-long disfigurement. Parental education is paramount to preventing these injuries. Clinicians should actively discourage steam inhalation and educate parents about alternative treatments for their child.

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## Health inequity during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cry for ethical global leadership

Widespread reports of disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic among already vulnerable communities worldwide, from New York City to New Orleans and Chicago, to the shocking pictures of bodies lying in the streets in Ecuador, represent a prelude of the impact in low-income and middle-income countries, home to more than 80% of the world's population. Disadvantaged people are at higher risk of infection and death from COVID-19, and they have less access to care due to systems that treat health as a commodity and not a human right. Furthermore, most health-care systems are not prepared to handle a pandemic of this magnitude. Overwhelmed European and US systems are ominous reminders of the challenges faced in poor countries.