

## Keeping a classroom pet

We are a nation of animal lovers and, over this academic session, SSERC has received several enquiries about keeping a classroom pet. Your wish list has included terrapins, bearded dragons, snakes, leopard geckos and axolotl. Our Code of Practice (CoP), *Materials of Living Origin*, provides support when making the decision to commit to a classroom pet.

The key consideration is that there should always be sound educational reasons for having any animal in school and the animal's wellbeing should be of paramount importance. A member of staff, who has a sound understanding of the biology and natural history of the animal, should be assigned and we would recommend that a policy is drawn up that includes maintenance and procedures for the care of animals throughout the week, weekend and holidays, together with details of an appropriate vet who can support with professional care if required. SSERC can provide a template of such a policy.

Appendix 5 of SSERC's CoP includes a guide for which animals might be suitable as classroom pets. A brief note on this: we receive many enquiries about reptiles; many reptiles, including the crested gecko (Figure 1), would not be an animal SSERC would recommend given their complex care needs. <<



Figure 1 - Crested Gecko: not recommended as a classroom pet

## Use of heavy metals in schools

We have had a few enquiries recently asking whether it is permissible for learners to use solutions of lead compounds in Advanced Higher project work; mainly in connection to enzyme inhibition.

The short answer is yes. The main danger from lead is from long-term exposure, even low level, and this mainly comes from ingestion or inhalation. Even preparing the solutions, there should be no danger of inhalation of dust or aerosols and good laboratory hygiene, perhaps enhanced with the wearing of gloves, should ensure that no lead is ingested either directly or, a more likely scenario, via the hands – which should, of course, be washed after carrying out practical work.

As well as lead, we have had queries about Cobalt compounds. The same caveats apply but both of these, and others, do still pose the problem of disposal. Most heavy metals, including copper, are potent, long-lasting environmental toxins and as such anything other than a

very low concentration cannot be washed to waste and needs to be kept for uplift. A recent query involved 0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup> cobalt sulphate and this would need to be over 1,000 more dilute than that to be legally disposed down the sink!

It is also perhaps worth raising here one of the key points of Health and Safety law, including COSHH (the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health regulations): if there is a safer way of achieving an end then that is the way you should do it. There are various enzyme inhibition experiments that can be done that do not raise such issues of toxicity for either the individual or the environment so they are to be preferred unless there is no viable alternative. <<