

'Acid test' for jeans that pose a health risk

By Johnson Sze

THE Consumer Council may conduct tests on "acid-wash" jeans and garments to see if they contain chemicals that pose a health hazard.

The council was seeking information from laboratories before deciding whether it should press ahead with the tests.

A council spokesman, Mr Kenneth So, said the watchdog body had received several inquiries from consumers asking whether the so-called garments would cause skin cancer.

The artificially faded garments — highly fashionable at present — are treated with potassium permanganate in an acidic medium — hence the name "acid-wash".

But manufacturers were keeping the exact nature of their treatment methods a secret.

Buyers had expressed concern that any traces of the chemicals in the fabric could cause skin problems.

Mr Fung Kwok-wing, an ex-

pert in occupational diseases and safety officer at Hongkong University, said he understood that potassium permanganate was not carcinogenic (cancer-causing).

But he was worried that any traces of the chemical in the finished product, mixed with the wearers' perspiration, could be "corrosive" to the skin.

The acid-wash method gave an intermingled light and dark-blue pattern.

However, different factories had come up with their own ways to get the "special effects". They have been keeping their formula under wraps and regard them as a "top commercial secret".

In general, they used potassium permanganate (KMnO₄) or a reducing agent or a bleaching agent. However, whatever agent was used, it only worked effectively in an acidic medium. That was how the fabric got its name "acid-wash".

According to rumours floating in the dyeing and garment industries, Holland had banned the importation of a consignment of "acid-wash" garments from Hongkong.

But an Industry Department official told *The Standard* that inquiries had been directed to the Dutch and West German governments through the Hongkong Office in Brussels.

Both governments, however, had denied restricting the import of "acid-wash" garments from Hongkong.

The West German govern-

ment said it was running tests on imported "acid-wash" jeans to see if they were hazardous to health.

The Standard has learned that overseas buyers, while placing their orders, recently began asking Hongkong manufacturers to present a test report from an internationally recognised laboratory on samples of their finished products.

Overseas buyers were particularly worried about the acidity and about any traces of potassium permanganate that may remain in the products.