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The dirty secrets of the cosmetics and personal care industry

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DO you really know what's in that stay-on lipstick you bought for \$60? Have you ever wondered what makes it stay on for so long? And those fancy names on the label of your moisturiser: micro-liposomes, thermal spring, hydra-treatment, bio sculpting complex, ultrasomes. What are these?

As a public and environmental health researcher, who works on projects that slice and dice placentas and umbilical cords, and examines the chemical compounds in them, I can tell you, there are a lot of chemicals used in cosmetics and personal care products that should not be in (or on) the human body, particularly newborn babies.

Believe me, it's not a pretty face or the health of our children that the industry is interested in.

What toxic chemicals are you exposing yourself to?

On average, women use 12 personal care products a day, exposing them to more than 160 chemical ingredients. Men are exposed to half as many chemicals because they use only half the personal care products that women do.

Most beauty routines include the use of carcinogens, suspected carcinogens, hormone and endocrine disruptors, neurotoxins, allergens and other harmful substances. They are in everything, including shampoo, hair dye, nail polish, body lotion, foundation, lipstick and hair spray.

Research by the US Environmental Working Group (EWG) *Skin Deep* found:
1/3 of personal care products contain a least one ingredient linked to cancer

45% of products contain an ingredient that may be harmful to the reproductive system or to a baby's development

56% of products contain 'penetration enhancer' chemicals, which help other chemicals penetrate faster and deeper into the body

How do they get inside our bodies?

Cosmetic and personal care ingredients enter our body, both directly and indirectly via the skin (dermatologically), the digestive system (ingestion), or the respiratory system (inhalation).

While some chemicals can be excreted through the body, the presence of many chemicals are bioaccumulative (cumulate in the DNA, organs, bones, blood, fat etc), while others react with bio-molecules such as DNA, haemoglobin, or fatty acids. Exposures in early life, including in utero, can have significant life-long health impacts.

Consider that every time you hold your child, they inhale the chemicals in your moisturiser, foundation and perfume. Consider that when you kiss your child, they are potentially ingesting the phthalates in your lipstick. Consider that many of these toxic chemicals in your cosmetics are also passed on to your baby through your breast milk and via the placenta when your baby is growing in utero and at its most vulnerable (babies do not have a blood brain barrier while in the womb and no detoxifying enzymes).

'But how can this be so?' I am asked in my workshops. 'Surely, if it's on the shelf it must be safe?'

If it's on the shelf it must be safe - or is it?

These days, we as consumers are usually not presented with all the information about the products we use: how they are produced (processed/manufactured/transported), where the ingredients come from, or the conditions of workers involved in producing the products.

It's also not an even playing field when it comes to marketing products in the public sphere. For every \$1 spent on trying to improve the nutrition of the world's population, for example, \$500 is spent by the food industry on advertising

processed foods.

Similarly, the cosmetic and toiletry industry spends millions of dollars each year producing advertisements that promise healthier, happier kids, leaner bodies, younger skin and better lifestyles. They present their information as the 'truth', 'mainstream', 'neutral' and 'objective'.

Consider, however, that there is no current Australian standard for the labeling of ingredients in cosmetics. While the Cosmetics, Toiletry and Fragrances' Association Dictionary advocates that ingredients be written in the common name of the compound, many companies do not use the common name of the chemicals.

Instead, they use the source of the chemical, for example, 'palm oil', instead of the chemical name, 'Diethanolamine' or 'Sodium Lauryl Sulphate' (one of the most common foaming agents used in cosmetics, shampoo, hand wash, and also found in floor cleaners, engine degreasers and car wash soaps).

Incidental (or inactive) ingredients – those which do not have a technical or functional effect in the final product and are present at slight levels – do not have to be listed. Flavours and fragrances are also exempt from labels.

Manufacturers may also apply for confidentiality or trade secrets exemption in relation to the formulation of the product. If successful, the manufacturer can list only the patented name of the formula and not its specific ingredients.

Now you know where the terms 'bio sculpting complex', 'Forti-pHirm Complex,' and 'Ultrasomes' come from. This exemption process effectively denies consumers the right to access information about the ingredients in the product.

Terms such as 'hypoallergenic', 'fragrance free', 'dermatologist tested', 'low-sensitivity', 'allergy tested', and 'non-irritating' are also ambiguous in that there are no official definitions in the personal care and cosmetics industry. These terms can mean almost anything.

Current regulations also do not require manufacturers of commercial chemicals to supply any toxicity data before selling their products. The vast majority of chemicals on the market are not required to be tested for toxicity of the body.

Exposing the lack of protective policies

What does it mean for the health of the next generation that we have been exposing them to a chemical cocktail since they were in the womb? What does it mean for the economy if we put a stop to many of the chemicals in personal care products (not to mention food, furniture, clothing, carpets, medication, agriculture)?

Perhaps the most publicised case in history of blatant denial of the effects of toxic chemicals is the tobacco industry. Despite inextricable evidence linking

smoking and cancer in the 1950s, the tobacco industry continued to deny harm: 1956: "I state that, in our considered opinion, there is no proof at all that smoking causes lung cancer, and much to suggest that it cannot be the cause". (Imperial Tobacco)

1976: "None of the things which have been found in tobacco smoke are at concentrations which can be considered harmful. Anything can be considered harmful. Apple sauce is harmful if you get too much of it". (Philip Morris)

1998: "We don't believe it's ever been established that smoking is the cause of disease". (Murray Walker, Chief Spokesperson for the Tobacco Institute)

1998: "I'm unclear in my own mind whether anyone dies of cigarette smoking-related diseases". (Geoffrey Bible, Chairman of Philip Morris)

Finally, after decades of denying that cigarettes are addictive and carcinogenic, the industry admits that 'they manipulated the nicotine content of their products for the specific purpose of keeping smokers addicted, and that they falsified scientific research, thereby lying to the public about the deadly effects of smoking tobacco'.

The truth was finally revealed, but not without casualties. Cigarette companies, like the cosmetic and personal care industry, routinely place the needs of shareholders over the consideration of public health.

Demanding precautionary policies

It is often said that 'if slaughterhouses had glass walls, we'd all be vegetarian'. It is increasingly recognised that consumers have a right to know what is in the products they use and how they are produced, and to demand protective policies.

At the heart of this struggle (which is yet to come to Australia) between the chemical and cosmetic industry and public health and safety is the question of who decides, and how they decide, what is safe.

Historically, industry has always taken the position that there is no reason to hold up production of useful products if no danger has been proven. The law allows for a certain amount of 'acceptable risk'.

But has this 'proceed until danger is proven' method been effective?

One only has to look at the range of chemical disasters throughout the twentieth century as a result of releasing products whose danger only becomes apparent over time.

Notably, lead, asbestos, tobacco, radioactive materials and many pharmaceutical drugs are examples of substances which became widely used by the public

because scientific studies could not initially prove with certainty that they caused harm.

Given this historical context, it is clear that establishing a different method for deciding how and when industry should proceed with the introduction of new substances or products is critical. Many advocates, including parents and health professionals, argue for the precautionary principle.

The precautionary principle calls for taking action against threatened harm to people and ecosystems, even in the absence of full scientific certainty. The rationale is that modern technologies and human activities can inflict long-term, global environmental and human damage, and that conclusive scientific evidence of such damage may become available too late to avert it. The precautionary principle asks whether harm can be prevented instead of assessing degrees of 'acceptable' risk.

Are you a conscious consumer?

We make choices every day about the personal care and cosmetic products we purchase and use.

Here are some of my tips for living a healthier life, reducing toxic exposure and avoiding products that contain harmful ingredients:

Read the label – marketing claims are limited by the law, and can mean anything or nothing at all, including claims like natural, hypoallergenic, fragrance free, natural and organic;

Familiarise yourself with a good chemical data base:

- Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep Database
www.cosmeticsdatabase.com

Use Certified Organic, plant-based products – look for ingredients that are certified organic to food standards (and have the certified organic logo). Personal care and cosmetics should be as pure as the foods we eat.

Certified organic products are grown and processed without the use of synthetic chemicals, fertilisers or genetically modified organisms.

Organic products are not just chemical-free by testing. It is about the way the product ingredients have been grown, prepared, processed and packaged.

Standards to achieve certification are internationally recognised, and are assured through annual audits of all certified operators by an independent third party auditor.

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