

Chemicals under the Spotlight
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Case Study 2: Cosmetics

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I'm representing the Danish Consumer Council where my job is to attend to consumer protection in relation to health. The Danish Consumer Council is an organisation which represents the interest of consumers and is independent of public authorities and commercial interests.

Introduction

Cosmetics include a large range of products such as shampoo, shaving foam, tooth paste, soap and make-up. I'm certain that most of you have used a cosmetic product this morning.

(slide with pictures). Today cosmetics are regulated by a separate Directive (76/768/EEC), but the objective of the Directive that "Cosmetic products must not cause damage to human health" is not being met today. As many as 10% of all persons are allergic to substances in cosmetic products, and there is an upward tendency. This is what an allergic reaction may look like (referring to the slide).

In the Danish Consumer Council's magazine we have recently asked the readers to contact us if they have experienced an allergic reaction to hair dye

or hair bleaching products. And subsequently we have received a number of reactions from consumers who have typically had moderate or strong allergic reactions, such as fainting or wounds, followed by absence from work and temporary or permanent medical treatment. For some people the symptoms have stopped, for others they have lasted for up to 15 years.

An allergy to chemicals in cosmetics leads to a reduced quality of life and may well have a serious negative impact on a person's social and professional life. This is a risk that most persons are exposed to every day without their knowing anything about it.

If allergy to chemicals keeps rising as it has done until now, we will all have allergy in the year 2016 (source 1) – including everybody present in this room today.

The worst products off the shelves

All substances that are known to cause allergy, cancer, mutagenicity, endocrine disruption or acute toxicity, or which contain substances toxic to reproduction, should be banned in cosmetic products. And I wonder how many serious reactions and how many sick persons it takes before the industry starts to make safe products. The Danish Consumer Council wants to put an end to all of these cosmetic injuries.

Post marketing surveillance

Cosmetics should go through post marketing surveillance like we know it from pharmaceuticals, food additives and pesticides. No cosmetic product should be sold unless it had been approved by an authority. That means that all ingredients, including the old ones, must be approved *before* they are

used on human beings. I hope this will result in more safe products. We know from the restrictions on nickel in products, that it actually helps to remove the allergenic substances from the consumers. Therefore we believe that post marketing surveillance will improve the health of the consumers.

Collection of damages within the industry

Today the industry has an obligation to collect data of damages on humans caused by cosmetics. It seems like the industry doesn't realise the problems. The consumers would be in better hands if general practitioners and dermatologists were required to report cases of allergy to cosmetic products to the authorities in all of Europe.

All substances must be indicated on the label

All fragrance substances should be indicated on the label. At present the industry can conceal harmful substances such as phthalates or preservatives under the designation “perfume”. The industry needs to come out in the open and inform us about *all* substances. And, now we are talking about fragrances, all known fragrance allergens should be banned in cosmetics. We think that perfume should be removed from sanitary towels, tampons, cotton buds, napkins etc. These are all products that come close to our salivary glands. Fragrances should be removed from products in schools and day care centres.

Purity requirement

There needs to be a purity requirement for the ingredients, because of the risk that substances, which are otherwise harmless, may be contaminated to such a degree that they become harmful. This could be the case of lead contents in an otherwise acceptable hair dye.

Expiry and use-by dates

We need expiry and use-by dates on all cosmetic products to enable the consumers to buy the freshest products. In future the manufacturer should introduce an expiry date based on stability tests and microbiological tests. We hope that the industry will juggle with, for example, a shorter period of expiry and no use of preservatives.

It is a myth that people grow from their allergy

It is a myth that people grow from their allergy. When a person has had an allergy to a chemical substance he will never get rid of it again. (Source 2). Therefore we want to take special care of the children.

Why must we show particular considerations for children?

Because damages to children will follow them for the rest of their life, and because children are more sensitive than adults, there must be special rules regarding children.

No perfume, preservatives or dyes

Still more people become allergic to fragrances, and at the European level we are talking about 4-8 million persons. Once you have become allergic to fragrances there is no cure.

Allergy to preservatives is the second biggest problem. Though it's possible to manufacture products without preservatives.

To summarise:

- Post marketing surveillance.

- Fragrances removed from schools and day care centres.
- All fragrances, preservatives and dyes away from small children.
- Purity requirements and full labelling.

Thank you for your attention!

References:

Source 1: “Ugeskrift for Læger”, October 1999 (leading article).

Source 2: Charlotte Supli Ulrik, Rigshospitalet Denmark, October 1999.

Questions to the discussion

The manufacturers almost deny that cosmetic allergy is a major problem in Europe. Is this due to ignorance on their part?

Or is it because they don't trust the results of the scientists?