The Dirty Truth

With escalating concerns about the chemicals in everyday beauty products, a battle is raging online and, now, in DC. Martha McCully investigates.

Promising? Perhaps. But if you ask many chemists and product creators about these developments, you may not hear a sigh of relief. “I roll my eyes every time someone wants to create a new brand and the first thing out of their mouth is ‘clean,’” says developer Tamar Kamen, who has worked with companies such as Estée Lauder and Peter Thomas Roth. “I truly do not believe that topical skin care can be dangerous systemically.” When asked about research linking ingredients like parabens and phthalates to hormone disruption and even cancer, Kamen says the test doses are at levels “disproportionate to what you would put on your face.” In other words, it’s the dose that makes the poison. After all, even water can kill you if you drink too much.

The stark differences of opinion is most acute online, of course, and laced with plenty of vitriol. Scroll through the comments sections of Insta-famous beauty chemists like LabMuffin-BeautyScience of Australia or anonymous beauty vigilante Estée Laundry, and you’ll find fiery disagreements about what’s bad for your body, what’s bad for the environment, and what’s blatant fearmongering. Grab some popcorn and prepare to Google a few ingredients—or 100.

But what may finally bring down the gavel on some of these disputes is the Cosmetic Safety Enhancement Act of 2019, introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives last December—only the second time in 60 years there’s been a hearing about cosmetic reform on the federal level—and two new bills in California. The key proposals in the act require cosmetic companies to register formulas with the FDA and mandate better ingredient transparency. California’s bills have similar demands: One would require the disclosure of fragrance and flavor chemicals deemed toxic to human health and the environment but allow non-toxic chemicals to remain confidential. The second bill would outlaw 13 of the most hazardous chemicals still permissible in the States, including formaldehyde, lead, mercury, asbestos, and two phthalates and two parabens already banned by the European Union.

More than 1,300 ingredients are currently off-limits in the EU. In comparison, the United States has only prohibited 11. While some big beauty companies formulate products for their international markets simultaneously (making them de facto compliant with the strictest laws), the last time the U.S. updated its list was in 1938, decades before retina or long-wearing waterproof carbon black mascara was even invented.

Surprisingly, the FDA does not regulate the beauty industry as a matter of course (nor does any other federal agency), and the terms green, botanical, pure, safe, nontoxic, vegan, and, yes, clean are not regulated by any governing body (the term organic is regulated by the USDA, not the FDA). It’s up to a company to test whether its products are safe. Does that happen? Four sources I spoke with used the phrase “the wild West” to describe the beauty industry: “No one is minding the store when it comes to the safety of cosmetic products,” says Janet Nudelman, director of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, which is sponsoring the two bills in California.

Think about formaldehyde, flagged as a possible human carcinogen by the National Toxicology Program in 1981, it’s still allowed in hair-straightening treatments. Or triclosan, found to potentially cause tumors, which was a commonplace antibacterial ingredient until it was banned from liquid soap in 2016 (though it may still be in your toothpaste). That’s not to say that all synthetics are bad and all natural ingredients are entirely safe—some essential oils can burn the skin, and asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral fiber. Last fall, JAMA published a letter entitled “Natural Does Not Mean Safe: The Dirt on Clean Beauty Products,” which warned against misleading greenwashing tactics in marketing. Plus, sometimes the starting point of one ingredient can usher in another that may be just as harmful, if not worse. But consumer demand alone can also push out ingredients if they’re perceived as dangerous. Houston-based product developer Mark Broussard says, “Once something [faked] hold in the minds of consumers, what’s the point? If consumers see parabens in your product, they won’t buy it.”

Parabens, one of the most oft-cited and oft-depended ingredients of concern, may be the poster child for the clean beauty conflict. Commonly used in cosmetics and other products as preservatives, parabens have been shown to mimic estrogen, qualifying them as endocrine disruptors—but research has also shown that parabens’ ability to bind to human estrogen receptors is weak. And while oncology professor Philippa Darbre, PhD, says in Toxic Beauty that “I actually quite upset about how much [paraben] I’ve measured in human breast tissue,” there is still no evidence that in its presence actually triggers cancer. “Parabens are naturally occurring in fruits and vegetables, so customers are being exposed to them anyway,” says New Jersey–based cosmetic chemist N’Kita Wilson. “There is a class of parabens that have been banned in the EU, not because they were deemed unsafe but because there wasn’t enough data.”

Nevertheless, many dermatologists remain skeptical. “I take ingredients in products incredibly seriously, and so do my patients,” says Whitney Bowe, MD, who practices in New York City. “In the case of parabens, I don’t believe in innocent until proven guilty.” Macrene Alexiades, MD PhD who published a paper on the toxicity of parabens in The Journal of Drugs in Dermatology in 2008, argues: “When people are applying five products a day, they’re exceeding the maximum allowable amount by tenfold.” Most American women use 12 cosmetic products a day (or 33, like yours truly). They add up.

“It’s well documented in medical toxicology journals that endocrine disruptors act additively,” says Ruthann Rudel, director of research at the Silent Spring Institute.
from T-shirts emblazoned with her likeness (possibly the pre-

requisite for a collection by Sweden-based designers Josephine Bergqvist and Liv Schick, founders of the label Raw Review). Their spring 2020 collection was made with only existing materials, including repurposed vintage T-shirts, bed sheets, and tablecloths.

As parts of the world grapple with shortages, anyone with a T-shirt or sheet in their closet might note the terrific UN statistic that it takes 10,000 liters of water to grow a kilo of cotton—’twice the amount used to produce a T-shirt or a bed sheet.’

Perhaps, as with so many eco-friendly shifts—like ditching plastic for glass bottles—change will come not from looking to the future, but to the past. Living sustainably came naturally to our grandparents and great-grandparents, who spot-cleaned, mended their clothing, and maintained minuscule wardrobes by modern standards. The tower may well have been right all along—in our closets. □

THE DIRTY TRUTH

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 155

in Massachusetts, where researchers identify preventable causes of breast cancer. “The Endocrine Society has written strong statements about reducing these chemicals, both for the general population and for those who are vulnerable, such as a fetus, women being treated for breast cancer, children, and those with genetic susceptibility.”

While more research and legislation can lead to safer products, bucks may come before bills. Hence, beauty’s buzziest marketing term: transparency. “I think there needs to be more industry-wide building of beauty on secrets to building beauty on clear, open communication,” says Gregg Renfrew, the founder and CEO of clean beauty brand Beautycounter, who testified in December at a hearing on the Cosmetic Safety Enforcement Act. “All members of the beauty community should be committed to a future that is healthy.”

To that end, third-party organizations like EccoR and Made Safe, and apps like SmartLabel and Think Dirty—as well as the Google Chrome extension Clearlya—are working to increase transparency by helping consumers decode the often-complicated ingredients in product labels. We’ll see what the commenters have to say about that. □

SOPHIE TURNER IS NOT A D%#K

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 164

“In Survivor, my character has been in rehab for [almost] an entire season. I’ve been in therapy for it. And I actually suffer from anxiety and eating disorders. It felt like I knew so much of that world.”

“I don’t think you really helped you with your own issues?” I ask.

She shrugs her shoulders, eats another blueberry. “I suppose, yeah, at the time, it’s very therapeutic, because I’m with a bunch of people myself. But afterwards, um, not so much.” She pats the tart blue orb into her mouth. “What happened to me is a lot more complicated than what our characters’ problems that I haven’t actually worked on me.”

Our time together is quickly coming to an end. Turner has been a model subject, answering questions candidly and in detail that perhaps nobody has bothered asking her before, revealing herself to an academic and diversifying her across the lobby. I see Turner’s publicist taking a seat on the couch. She gives me a little no-nonsense nod that seems somehow distinctly English. I have time for one more.

I ask her about the ending of Game of Thrones. “I haven’t watched it,” she says.

“That’s a safe answer.” I say archly, knowing her’s happy operating a little bit south of the PC border. I eat the last bit of crispy bacon. And wait for her answer.

It’s important that she watches the show as soon as she started,” she says, “and I was planning to watch the rest. But then I fell behind. And then I started reading all these online reviews… I eased off the show, but I don’t want to ruin it.”

“I feel like you are never going to have everybody be satisfied with the ending. Especially a show that’s been going on for almost 10 years. It’s really about how they want it to end. You can’t make everyone happy.”

“How does it feel to have been part of one of the greatest shows of all time?”

“Pretty much since season three, we’ve been hearing, ‘Game of Thrones! It’s a phenomenon!’ I’ve been trying to, like, comprehend that. But when you’re in it, you can’t see it. Now that I’m out of it, I’m only starting to realize how incredible it was, what a revelation it was for television. I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I’ve been, like, blessed.’ When it’s happening, you don’t realize you’re among the greatest. You’re around the atmosphere. The way they worked. I was spoiled by that show completely. And I’ll never have anything like it again. Nothing will be the same.”

□

COVERS

ON SOPHIE TURNER: Page 164, 165; select Louis Vuitton bottoms.

ON JANE FONDA: Page 166, 167; Alexander McQueen (London). For details see p. 166.


EDITOR’S LETTER

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 121

by colorWithRed. Mixing and matching. Letting the past be the past. In the eyes of Climate Control Tower I; meteorologists believe the dust cloud is bouncing around from the Southern Bubbling Swamplands where no living creatures had been flourishing where “grasses” and “trees” once grew plentifully. The girl is a model subject, answering questions candidly and in detail that perhaps nobody has bothered asking her before, revealing herself to an academic and diversifying her across the lobby. I see Turner’s publicist taking a seat on the couch. She gives me a little no-nonsense nod that seems somehow distinctly English. I have time for one more.

I ask her about the ending of Game of Thrones. “I haven’t watched it,” she says.

“That’s a safe answer.” I say archly, knowing her’s happy operating a little bit south of the PC border. I eat the last bit of crispy bacon. And wait for her answer.

It’s important that she watches the show as soon as she started,” she says, “and I was planning to watch the rest. But then I fell behind. And then I started reading all these online reviews… I eased off the show, but I don’t want to ruin it.”

“I feel like you are never going to have everybody be satisfied with the ending. Especially a show that’s been going on for almost 10 years. It’s really about how they want it to end. You can’t make everyone happy.”

“How does it feel to have been part of one of the greatest shows of all time?”

“Pretty much since season three, we’ve been hearing, ‘Game of Thrones! It’s a phenomenon!’ I’ve been trying to, like, comprehend that. But when you’re in it, you can’t see it. Now that I’m out of it, I’m only starting to realize how incredible it was, what a revelation it was for television. I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I’ve been, like, blessed.’ When it’s happening, you don’t realize you’re among the greatest. You’re around the atmosphere. The way they worked. I was spoiled by that show completely. And I’ll never have anything like it again. Nothing will be the same.”

□