Ecoholic Body: Save yourself

Gideon Forman
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An eclectic guide to enviro-friendly body products – think shampoo, toothpaste, jewellery, dildos – Ecoholic Body is part Consumer Reports, part political manifesto. The book identifies brands deemed safer for people and the planet, but also highlights the federal government's appalling record on consumer protection and urges vigorous citizen action to right the myriad wrongs. It reminds us how many considerations need to be addressed – animal cruelty and working conditions, among them – if we're to shop with justice.

Ottawa's unwillingness to remove toxins from personal-care products is at the book's core and, as author Adria Vasil makes clear, the problem has two aspects: a failure to enforce restrictions already in place and a failure to create desperately needed additional ones.

Consider estrogen-mimicking substances such as phthalates and parabens. Nominally banned in cosmetics, they nevertheless show up in our deodorants and makeup. Or take the carcinogen 1,4-Dioxane; it's on Health Canada's List of Prohibited and Restricted Cosmetic Ingredients, but still finds its way into body wash. The feds are simply not policing their laws.

More galling still is the fact some toxins are actually legal. Skin-lightening creams are allowed to contain a chemical called hydroquinone despite its genotoxic effects and links to cancer. Ottawa also permits the anti-bacterial triclosan (an endocrine disruptor); the insect repellent DEET (a neurotoxin); and makeup containing arsenic and lead. Vasil writes:

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/ecoholic-body-by-adria-vasil/article241...
“Canada allows double the amount of lead in cosmetics that California does.” I’d say that’s not merely negligent, it’s rife with contempt.

Of course this is all understood by the Europeans. One of Vasil’s themes is that their environmental policy is vast superiority. While Norway, Sweden and Denmark have phased out mercury in dental fillings, this neurotoxin can still be stuffed into Canadian mouths. The EU, unlike our own country, prohibits all known or probable carcinogens from personal-care products.

I’m a great admirer of this book but do wonder, ironically, it fosters consumerism. After identifying the bad products, it offers splendid green alternatives: organic-cotton blue jeans, vegan footwear, beeswax lipstick. Although it acknowledges living modestly is desirable, at times it made me want to buy more, not less. A work like this serves best when it asks us to forgo the unnecessary, when it makes recommendations about shoes, not nail polish and tooth whitener. Regarding the latter, the question is not, “Which brand should I buy?” but, “Do I truly need it?”

Gideon Forman is executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

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