

Sumbody founder reads into skin care labels

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

Friday, January 22, 2010



Deborah Burnes knows skin. She's studied it from the perspective of a trained cosmetologist, a chemical formulator and a sensualist who revels in botanical scents and textures.

She knows there are ingredients in dozens of body products that are perfectly safe and healthy for most people, yet many products, with labels claiming "natural" and "organic" are, in fact, what she calls Vitamin J - junky, dangerous chemicals she believes are potentially poisoning us and polluting the planet.

With the release of her book, "Look Great, Live Green" (Hunter House, October 2009), Burnes has joined the health and environmental activists who are determined to teach us how to understand the labels on the products we buy.

Burnes, who developed her own line of beauty and body products 10 years ago, approaches the topic with a distinct advantage.

"With my years of cosmetology training, daily contacts with cosmetic chemists and insider knowledge, I know all the tricks companies use to disguise potentially health-harming ingredients," Burnes says. And, she is quick to add, price is no guarantee of purity.

Stacy Malkan, co-founder of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, applauds efforts to educate consumers. "Choosing safer products is an immediate and relatively easy thing we can do to protect our health and the health of our families," she says.

Dali protégée

Burnes took her first steps on the path to beauty expert at age 6, when she was discovered by a well-known photographer in her Manhattan apartment building. At 9, she became a protégée of Salvador Dali.

"I worked with him for several years," says Burnes, "doing wild, outrageous things." For one exhibition, "Dali painted me silver, hoisted me two stories in the air and pressed me against a canvas," she laughs. At 13, Burnes' family relocated to Hollywood, where the teen aspired to the theater and modeling, but grew to just 5 feet 3 inches. She chose another route, studying cosmetology and "absolutely falling in love with skin."

Before that interest took off, however, she found herself in Napa, pursuing a stint in the wine industry and spending seven years learning how to isolate each individual scent and flavor in a wine. As CEO of the wine brokerage company Wine Selection, Burnes developed an industry reputation for her exquisite, highly respected nose and palate.

When her family started to grow, she left the wine business to her husband, starting Sumbody in Sebastopol.

"I looked for what I wanted in my local health food store and couldn't find it," Burnes says. Using her nose, and her childhood memories of her grandfather's garden, she created soaps, lotions and makeup. The line is now carried at Sumbody stores in Napa, Sebastopol, Alameda and Santa Barbara.

"We've become very conscious of the food we eat, what we put in our bodies," she says. "Now we need to become more aware of what we put on our bodies and absorb through our skin, our largest organ."

Burnes, with daughters Autumn and Mica, set up mini-offices in the aisles of Whole Foods and Walmart, dissecting hundreds of shampoo, lotion and toothpaste labels. Her book lists 10 ingredients to avoid. For example: Parabens, used as preservatives in many products, are being tested for possible cancer-causing effects, and phthalates, commonly found in fragrance and linked to hormone disruption.

Disturbing finding

One of Burnes' most disturbing discoveries: "Chemicals that are banned from industrial manufacturing for safety reasons can be used in body care products.

"I found, using professional reference sources, that many ingredients in common products have 5-foot-long lists of potential toxic side effects, posing a triple threat: environmental pollution during manufacture, physical harm when we use them and more pollution when we wash them down the drain," she says.

Burnes offers in-home "chemical-free makeovers" during which she scours medicine cabinets and bathroom counters, replacing toothpaste, deodorant and body lotions with safer, simpler, healthier and often less expensive versions.

However, when it comes to the last word on safe, healthy beauty and body products, Burnes balks at the title of expert.

"Part of the problem with this industry is that there is no agreement, there are no experts, ingredients change all the time. Chemists, dermatologists and environmental activists all debate the issue of safety," she says.

"There is a lot of research under way, but in the meantime, we all need to become our own experts. We all need to take charge."

Burnes' tips for junking skin care junk

Use less: Five face creams daily equals five times the possible exposure to toxins. One will do.

Multitask: Think of shampoo as body wash. Clean and no clashing scents.

Play detective: Study the back of the label for short, pronounceable ingredient lists.

Pursue purity: Purchase with sense, not cents. Don't fall for price or package promises.

Get dirty: Makeup with minerals. Many are completely chemical free.

Source: "Look Great, Live Green: Choosing Beauty Solutions That Are Planet Safe and Budget Smart" (Hunter House, 360 pages).

'Green' reading and resources

Deborah Burnes will read from her book at 7 p.m. Feb. 10 at Borders Union Square, San Francisco; (415) 399-1633.

Her Sumbody client list includes Katie Holmes, Ashton Kutcher and Jennifer Garner. For more information about Northern California stores or the line, go to www.sumbody.com.

E-mail comments to style@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/01/22/LVIH1ALODE.DTL>

This article appeared on page **N - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle