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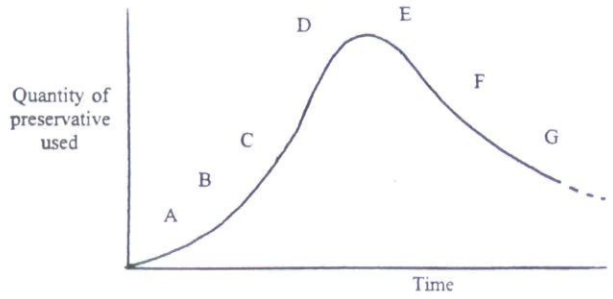
Letter to the Editor

Cosmetic preservatives

Dear Sir

The introduction of full ingredient labelling on all European cosmetics and toilet articles, as required by the European Cosmetics Directive (6th amendment), allows consumers to avoid products containing substance(s) to which they have a known allergic response.

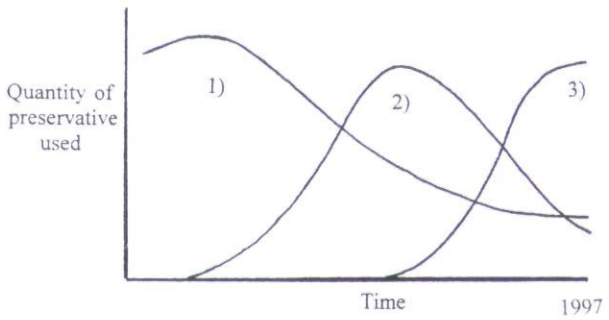
This long-sought customer choice gives the cosmetic industry, dermatologists and European/national authorities an opportunity to reflect on their interaction with respect to certain contentious ingredients. I refer, i.a., to cosmetic preservatives which have received unremitting "bad press" over the past 20+ years. While allergenicity is not in dispute, I have observed over this period a pattern of behaviour which can be shown (empirically) in the following diagram:



where:

A general industry recognition of specific preservative;
B adoption by major companies, followed by small/medium enterprises;
C first allergic incidents published (e.g., in short communications, *Contact Dermatitis*);
D full research papers with patient statistics: local/EU authorities stir, industry microbiologists start frantic search for replacement;
E conference activity, popular press and media "scare stories", witch hunt/sound bites by politicians, consumer groups, etc; national "voluntary" restrictions take shape; trade groups arbitrarily ban products containing the substance and/or promote products which do not contain it;
F "coup de grâce" research papers appear; "de facto" bans are in place, allergic responses begin to decline;
G interest and clinical observation decline/move on.

Of course, the "success" is a result of timely replacement and now the whole process starts again. The recurring pattern is roughly thus:



Let me propose for reader reflection:

(i) formaldehyde
(ii) Kathon CG®
(iii) Euxyl K400®

The purpose of this letter is to suggest that the 1997 introduction of the EU ingredient labelling scheme heralds an era of informed choice, both for the consumer *and* the manufacturer.

Consumers can now avoid ingredients by reading labels, while manufacturers should be allowed to use the full range of preservatives which are permitted under Annex VI of the Cosmetics Directive without secondary restriction or coercion. Only by having a wide range of preservatives in general use can the consumer benefit in a meaningful way.

One final comment: the environmental impact of consumer products must also be brought into the equation, making "pariahs", such as formaldehyde with its simple chemical structure and fugitive nature, worthy of rehabilitation.

Yours sincerely

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