

Ecowaste calls out QC stores for selling mercury-laced cosmetics

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THE Ecowaste Coalition on Sunday criticized beauty product stores in Quezon City for selling skin-lightening products containing mercury despite the nationwide ban imposed on the hazardous chemical.

Quezon City's local government unit (LGU) has implemented a city-wide ban adopted in 2018 through Ordinance No. 2767—ahead of the 2020 phase-out deadline for mercury-added cosmetics under the Minamata Convention on Mercury.

Notwithstanding such a ban, some stores in Quezon City still sell imported skin-whitening creams adulterated with mercury, according to Ecowaste.

As part of its campaign to protect women and other vulnerable populations from mercury poisoning, the Ecowaste Coalition visited retail hubs in Cubao, Novaliches, and along Commonwealth Avenue on January 19 and 20 to check store compliances with the mercury cosmetic ban.

Before this, the group on November 11, 26, and 27, 2023 monitored 28 retail stores selling skin-whitening products banned by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for containing mercury above the maximum limit of one part per million (ppm), and for lacking valid certificates of product notification or CPN. The group promptly reported its findings to Mayor Josefina “Joy” Belmonte and Dr. Ramona Asuncion Abarquez of the Quezon City Health Department (QCHD).

“Much to our disappointment, we found at least 10 stores still selling mercury contaminated facial and underarm whitening creams from Pakistan and Thailand,” said Aileen Lucero, who is Ecowaste Coalition’s national coordinator. “This is despite the recent store inspections conducted by the QCHD, in response to the complaints we lodged against the errant sellers.” Nonetheless, Lucero credited the QCHD for its efforts to have Ordinance 2767 implemented, while requesting the FDA’s Regional Enforcement Unit to step in and assist Quezon City and other LGUs in curbing the unlawful trade of mercury-added cosmetics.

Last January 15, the Quezon City LGU, through its Business Permit and Licensing Department, endorsed the complaints lodged by the Ecowaste Coalition to the Office of FDA Director General Samuel Zacate “for information and proper disposition [as the matter is within his authority.]”

As it again demonstrated the toxicity of the said products, the coalition on January 20 purchased samples of the FDA-banned skin-lightening products for chemical screening. Among those obtained by the group and then screened for mercury were Goree Gold 24K Beauty Cream (bought for P200 from MC Skin Care at Murphy Public Market), Goree Day & Night Beauty Cream (P250, from Red Coco, Farmers Plaza), Goree Beauty Cream with Lycopene (P170, from David & Lyn, Commonwealth Market) and 88 Total White Underarm Cream (P280, from Frelan Trading, Nova Plaza Mall).

Using a handheld Olympus Vanta Mseries X-ray Fluorescence analyzer, the group detected high mercury concentrations in the analyzed creams: 29,200 ppm for Goree Gold 24 K Beauty Cream; 28,960 ppm for Goree Day & Night Beauty Cream; 28,150 ppm for Goree Beauty Cream with Lycopene; and 2,352 ppm for 88 Total White Underarm Cream.

Added to cosmetics that are marketed to achieve a fairer and flawless skin complexion, mercury inhibits the body's production of melanin that causes the skin to appear whiter. People are exposed to the supposed whitening agent through dermal absorption, inhalation of vapors, and ingestion.

Repeated exposure to the lethal chemical in skin-lightening products can, in fact, result in skin discoloration, rashes and scarring, as well as reduced ability of the skin to resist bacterial and fungal infections. It can also damage the kidneys and the central nervous system, causing anxiety, depression, hallucinations, personality changes, and tremors.

Aside from sustained law enforcement action by national and local government agencies, the Ecowaste Coalition is also urging authorities to mount a "natural is beautiful" campaign to inculcate acceptance of one's natural skin color among Filipinos, and to refrain from using chemical-based whiteners to change one's skin tone.

"Embracing our natural skin color is the easiest way to avoid mercury exposure via skin creams with undisclosed mercury content," the group said. "We need to stop equating beauty with whiteness. Let's say no to colorism."