

SKIN-LIGHTENING CREAMS POISON THE SKIN.

A recent article (1) appeared in the South African Medical Journal which drew attention to the fact that many skin-lightening creams are very harmful to the skin.

They contain a substance known as hydroquinone which may have serious effects and leads to the disfigurement of the face. The skin in sun-exposed areas such as the face may become darker with black blotches, leading to the frantic application of more of the skin-lightening cream, which in turn aggravates the darkening of the skin.

The skin lightening creams have limited use in the treatment of white people with skin blemishes. The authors stress that the treatment should be carefully controlled and supervised and should not extend for more than a few months.

The manufacturers of "skin care" products for Black South Africans have an annual turnover of approximately 25 million rands (2). An article in the Sunday Times (Business Times) described the market for "general purpose" items and "skin lighteners" as "phenomenal", "ripe for the picking" and a "roaring trade". The authors of the article in the South African Medical Journal remark that the amount of products sold must indeed be extremely large to produce the vast numbers of people now suffering from skin problems as a result of using these creams.

In South Africa the gap between blacks and whites is wide - the whites, the upper and middle classes, are depicted as healthy, wealthy and happy; the blacks are working class, and seen as poor and unhappy. This is exploited by advertisers to suggest that black people with whiter skins will be happier, healthier and wealthier than their dark-skinned brothers and sisters. In fact the opposite is true - they will be unhappy and unhealthy because of the skin damage resulting from using these creams, also they will be a bit poorer - from buying a totally unnecessary commodity.

Shrewd advertising techniques are employed to convince Blacks that using these "skin lighteners" will lead to various forms of success in economic and social terms. There is, however, no control over the advertising of such creams, and magazines aimed at Black women readers carry numerous advertisements

2
PACE June 1980

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promoting the sale of these harmful products. The magazines feel a need to boost circulation figures, keep down the price, and attract advertising to subsidize the magazine and so editors are generally not willing to leave out advertisements of these products or even to publish articles which might make their readers aware of the dangers of skin-lightening creams.

Clearly, action should be taken to inform Blacks of the dangers of these creams. Chronic long-term use of these skin lighteners is clearly harmful and should be avoided. Action should also be taken to prevent the sale and advertising of these harmful products. Up to now, no sufferers of the effect of these creams have sought compensation through legal channels for the disfigurement they have suffered and this is perhaps a line of action that should be explored.

1. Findlay, G.H. and De Beer, H.A. (1980).
"Chronic Hydroquinone Poisoning of the Skin from Skin-Lightening Cosmetics", South African Medical Journal, 9 February 1980, p.187-190.
2. Creamer, M. (1978).
Sunday Times (Business Times), 22nd October 1978, p.4.