

Aborted fetus cells used in beauty creams

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A San Francisco cosmetics company has ignited an outcry among pro-lifers for including an unexpected ingredient in its anti-aging creams: skin-cell proteins from an aborted fetus.

Children of God for Life, a watchdog group that monitors the use of fetal material in medical products, called last week for a boycott of all treatments manufactured by Neocutis Inc., which acknowledges that the key ingredient in its product line was developed from an aborted boy.

"There's just no excuse for using aborted babies in skin-care products," said Debi Vinnedge, executive director of Children of God for Life, a 10-year-old organization based in Murfreesboro, Tenn. "The reaction, the shock and anger I've seen is incredible."

In a statement released Friday, in response to a wave of condemnation from pro-life and religious blogs, Neocutis defended the use of its trademarked ingredient, Processed Skin Cell Proteins, or PSP, arguing that the fetal cell line was harvested in a responsible, ethical manner for use in treating severe dermatological injuries.

The company compared its situation to that of researchers who used fetal kidney cells to develop the polio vaccine.

"Our view - which is shared by most medical professionals and patients - is that the limited, prudent and responsible use of donated fetal skin tissue can continue to ease suffering, speed healing, save lives and improve the well-being of many patients around the globe," said the statement.

The ingredient was developed at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland from proteins in the skin tissue of a 14-week-old male baby electively aborted at the university's hospital and donated to the Swiss university. The abortion was deemed medically necessary because the baby could not survive to term, according to Neocutis.

The fetal skin cell line was taken from a piece of skin the size of a postage stamp and donated voluntarily by the parents for medical research. The donation was approved by the hospital's medical ethics committee and in accordance with Swiss laws, said the Neocutis statement.

Neocutis also insisted that the one donation would be sufficient for the manufacture of its products. Critics argue that it's impossible to know how long the cell line will last, but Neocutis states on its Web site that "no additional fetal biopsies will ever be required."

"We feel we are in complete compliance with the laws of God and the laws of man," Neocutis President Mark J. Lemko said in an e-mail response to critics, which was posted on the Children of God for Life Web site.

Ms. Vinnedge accused the company of playing up PSP's medical applications in order to draw attention from its cosmetic uses. Although the company developed PSP for the treatment of skin ulcers, burns and scarring, Neocutis soon recognized the ingredient's value in restoring aging skin.

Neocutis cosmetic products using the cell line include Bio-Restorative Skin Cream, Bio-Gel Bio-Restorative Hydrogel, Lumiere Bio-Restorative Eye Cream and Bio-Restorative Serum with PSP Intensive Spot Treatment. In terms of price, they're not exactly comparable to Maybelline: A 1-ounce bottle of Journee Bio-Restorative Day Cream costs \$120.

Judie Brown, president of American Life League, said that although use of aborted fetal parts is indefensible for any purpose, Neocutis' use for a product as trivial as an anti-aging cream speaks uniquely to current trends and the desire for eternal youth.

"What's new about this is our cultural attitude toward beautification and our sense of self ... and living forever," she said.

Ms. Vinnedge said she would object to the use of the fetal cell lines no matter what their use, medical or cosmetic, arguing that mature cells are just as effective. Indeed, other companies make high-end skin creams using proteins derived from postnatal placentas, which Mrs. Brown called completely morally acceptable to pro-lifers.

Even so, Ms. Vinnedge said, using fetal tissue in anti-wrinkle cream crosses moral and ethical boundaries.

"This is pure vanity," Ms. Vinnedge said. "We're talking a medical treatment versus a vanity treatment."

She compared it to the Nazis' use of the skin of Jews to make lampshades. Her Web site showed a clip from the 1973 science-fiction movie

"Soylent Green," in which the "secret ingredient" in a popular wafer is found to be human flesh.

The original skin sample may have been tiny, she said, but so is a 14-week unborn baby. "They say the skin sample was the size of a postage stamp - well, something that size could mean the whole back," Ms. Vinnedge said.

Neither the Neocutis Web site nor its advertising makes any secret of the company's use of fetal cell lines.

The firm's online entries say the products were "inspired by fetal skin's unique properties" and that the technology "uses cultured fetal skin cells to obtain an optimal, naturally balanced mixture of skin nutrients."

"Neocutis means, literally, new skin. And who wouldn't like to turn back time to create flawless baby skin again?" says one ad.

Even the company's critics were surprised by its candor. For years, Ms. Vinnedge said, she has heard rumors that some beauty companies use aborted fetal cell lines in their products, but she's never been able to confirm it because the Food and Drug Administration doesn't require the listing of cosmetic ingredients.

"Usually, when people to write to us about cosmetics, we tell them it's impossible to find out," Ms. Vinnedge said. "That's why I can't believe [Neocutis] posted it."

Mrs. Brown said the company's statement struck her as morally and philosophically unmoored.

"We think the company has taken the position they have because they're trying to align themselves with the Catholic identity of some of their founders," she said. Neocutis officials "don't seem to think there's any complicity on their part" for using the products of the abortion.

"I think that many companies just say, 'Is there a good to be achieved,' and don't care how," she said.

Mrs. Brown said this development isn't especially surprising to her, recalling that her group published a book in 1981 called "101 Uses for a Dead Baby," in which author Olga Fairfax wrote that fetal tissue could be used for skin care products and even to grow new limbs.

"Now, we're more advanced than [Ms. Fairfax] could have imagined," Mrs. Brown said.

Ms. Vinnedge's organization has pushed Congress for years for more detailed labeling legislation in medicine, but she says she'll now expand her proposal to include cosmetics.

"PETA made sure we know that companies aren't testing cosmetics on animals," she said of the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. "We want to make sure they're not using fetal material."

c Victor Morton contributed to this report.

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