

Steroid Creams Sell Briskly, And Illicitly, as Cosmetics

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Each night, N'Daiye Deye coated herself with a mixture of over-the-counter ointments to make her ebony skin look lighter and younger. At first, the creams worked miracles: Dark spots on her legs disappeared, and her face seemed to glow.

But after 10 years, white spots appeared under Ms. Deye's eyes, and her skin became ashen, crinkled and cellophane-thin. She stopped using the creams, but then her face erupted with rashes, acne and red welts.

Ms. Deye sought the advice of Jonathan Zizmor, a New York dermatologist whose subway advertisements promise "beautiful, clear skin."

Says Dr. Zizmor: "There's very little I can do to treat her, because what she's been using is stronger than any medicine I can give her." As with narcotics, he says, the creams can cause adverse reactions both when they're used and when they're withdrawn.

Like many women treated by Dr. Zizmor, Ms. Deye, now 52 years old, had been using steroid creams imported and sold illegally in the U.S. as cosmetics. She says she used Betnovate and Dermovate, both of which are prescription drugs made by Britain's

Glaxo Wellcome PLC, as well as a Swiss-made steroid cream called Movate.

Under U.S. law, the steroids in these creams -- usually used short-term to treat serious psoriasis -- require a doctor's prescription. But they, and dozens of other, similar products, are readily available at cosmetic stores, supermarkets and beauty parlors in many major cities, including New York, Washington, Miami and Los Angeles. Most customers are middle-class women of African and Caribbean descent, usually in their 20s and 30s, says Rebat Halder, chairman of Howard University's dermatology department.

How these creams get from manufacturer to customer isn't fully known, but the route is believed to include black-market dealers. At the point of purchase, some of the steroid creams are packaged in pastel tubes and boxes and blend in easily on a cosmetics shelf. Others, like Betnovate and Dermovate, have a more pharmaceutical look. Not one of them is intended as a cosmetic. In fact, the steroid level is so high in the creams that U.S. dermatologists say they are circumspect in prescribing them. Doctors say they are seldom prescribed for facial use.

Dermatologists say they warn patients about side effects the creams cause if they are used improperly or for too long: stretch marks, thinning of the skin, blood vessels close to the surface, rashes and acne.

Extended use of steroids on large areas of skin can cause systemic effects, doctors say, including fluid retention, redistribution of body fat, thinning of the bones, diabetes, menstrual irregularities and hypertension. When they are sold illegally as cosmetics, the cream packages sometimes contain the product-information inserts found in regular prescriptions describing proper use and possible side effects.

The Food and Drug Administration regulates the sale and distribution of steroid creams. Spokesman Brad Stone says the FDA has been aware of the illegal sale of the products for almost a decade and is "looking into the matter."

Several of the creams are made by Glaxo Wellcome. Others, like Topsone and Prosone, are made by Medical & Chemical Agency SpA, a small, privately held pharmaceutical manufacturer in Milan. Other international companies produce yet more creams.

The illegal sale of pharmaceuticals among ethnic communities is a nationwide problem, says Gregory Thompson, a pharmacist who heads the Los Angeles County Regional Drug Information Center. "These steroid creams are some of the most common drugs we seize and burn," he says. "Some of the warehouses we bust have more drugs than a Walgreens."

In New York and Washington, cosmetics stores sell prescription steroid creams alongside nonprescription lighteners that contain legal bleaching agents but no steroids. "All these skin creams are big sellers," says Dan Park, store manager for Gi Gi's Cosmetic & Beauty Supply Co. in Takoma Park, Md. His family store has sold these creams for 20 years, Mr. Park says, but the demand has picked up in the past five years.

Leon Brown, a Takoma Park dermatologist who has treated many users of the steroid creams, says some use them for short periods -- say, to look good for a party. But more commonly, he says, the women mix a steroid cream with a cream bleach and apply the mixture daily for several years. Any of the women can get spotted skin, irregular pigmentation and irritations, he says.

Another dermatologist, Larry Gaston of nearby Silver Spring, Md., says those side effects are typical. One of his patients, Tigist Shashgo, says that four years ago, when she was 20 years old, she

began applying Dermovate directly to her face every night. She wanted to get rid of the dark shadows on her cheeks, she says. But after three months the dark spots had not lightened and her skin had begun to wrinkle and break out, so she stopped applying the cream. Her cheeks became red and blotchy and hot to the touch.

After four years and more than \$2,500 in treatments, Ms. Shashgo's acne has subsided, but the crow's-feet and redness remain. "When I come to this country, I don't have any of this. That's why I'm mad," says Ms. Shashgo, who grew up in Ethiopia.

"It takes years to heal the skin, and the redness may never go away," Dr. Gaston says.

Officials of Glaxo Wellcome and Medical & Chemical Agency say they have been aware of a problem with the unauthorized sale of their products for almost a decade, but they don't know how their products get to retailers.

"We have tried to locate the cream and get it off the shelves, and there is a criminal investigation under way" by the FDA, says Glaxo spokeswoman Thanta Isenhour. "We have been working with Customs and the FDA to stop it."

The FDA would not confirm that a criminal investigation is in progress. Washington, D.C., customs official Wes Windle, who is in charge of distributing FDA alerts to Customs field offices, said there has been no FDA alert about the steroid creams in question. He says the problem for Customs is "how do you identify one chemical out of the hundreds that come in under different brand names each day?"

Mr. Park, manager of Gi Gi's, says he gets his creams from International Beauty Exchange, a privately-held concern based in New York City, but he declined to produce a purchase order.

A manager at Town Beauty Supply, another Takoma Park cosmetics store, says he received steroid creams from IBE but also would not show an invoice. Harry Aini, owner of IBE, denies supplying Gi Gi's or any other store with steroid creams. He says individual store owners buy the creams from black-market dealers.

Smaller ethnic markets, like the Arada International Market in Takoma Park, Md., say they get their creams from the same suppliers who import specialty rice and grains targeted at an African and Caribbean clientele. Arada sells Dermovate, Prosone and other topical steroid creams -- several feet away from rice, beans and flour.

Arada owner Bahre Gebremedhim says he gets these creams from InterContinental Cold Crown Inc., a food distributor in Lanham, Md. Cold Crown officials say they used to buy the creams from street vendors in New York and bring them to the Washington area for resale; but one of them, Ade Balogun, says, "We only do food now."

Dr. Thompson, who helps Los Angeles police identify contraband pharmaceuticals, says these creams get into the country because most Customs officials who monitor the borders are trained to find street drugs, not skin cream. "Drugs to them are heroin and cocaine," he says.