

Executive health⁺

Green cleaner trades on environmental health

Niko Kloeten

The toxic chemicals used in many commercial cleaning products do harm well before they enter the waterways, "green" cleaning franchise Clean Planet warns.

Trading on its environmentally friendly cleaning products and techniques has helped the company grow rapidly despite the economic downturn, going up from three franchisees to 25 in less than two years.

It now has more than 40 cleaners operating throughout Auckland and according to director Mark Houghton-Brown the company is looking to expand nationwide and possibly even internationally in due time.

Clean Planet's clients range from some of New Zealand's cleanest workplaces (Labtests New Zealand) to some of its dirtiest (Fletcher Steel).

"Our vision is simply that a clean human environment does not need to compromise the pristine integrity of nature," he said.

"Our mission is to provoke a green revolution in New Zealand's dirty old cleaning industry."

Clean Planet, which was founded by Russell Werry and his wife Glynis, aims to use only safe cleaning products made from natural and non-toxic ingredients.

Where possible, Clean Planet seeks products with Environmental Choice certification.

All of its commercial cleaning franchisees drive eco-friendly vehicles and the team all wear uniforms made from sustainable textiles.

But ecological niceties aside, Mr Houghton-Brown said businesses have another reason to opt for green cleaners – they aren't as harmful to workers (and bosses) as other commercial cleaning products.

Many chemicals commonly used in these products are known to cause health problems even in small doses.

Pollution information website scorecard.org lists a whopping 500 different types of chemicals used in cleaning products that are known carcinogens.



GREEN REVOLUTION MISSION: The company says it is determined to clean up the 'dirty old cleaning industry'

And the Responsible Purchasing Network's *Responsible Purchasing Guide for cleaners (2nd edition)* outlined some of the many health problems associated with coming into contact with some of these cleaning chemicals.

"Custodial staff and others who spend time indoors, such as office workers, health employees, and students, are particularly susceptible to the health risks posed by these products.

"Health problems associated with cleaning chemicals include reproductive disorders, major organ damage, permanent eye damage, asthma and other respiratory ailments, headaches, dizziness, and fatigue."

It lists common cleaning ingredients that raise human health and environmental concerns.

Corrosive chemicals and strong irritants such as chlorine-based cleaners, are known to cause serious skin or eye damage, the guide says.

"Products with a very high or very low pH levels are also strongly irritating to the skin or eyes and should be avoided."

It also points the finger at

fragrances, which are added to products such as detergents and fabric softeners and can cause respiratory irritation and headaches and are particularly harmful to those with asthma or allergies.

Volatile organic compounds [VOCs] "are found in most conventional cleaning products and contribute to poor indoor air quality, often prompting asthma attacks. Outdoors, VOCs are linked to smog formation."

And finally, carcinogens and a variety of other hazardous chemicals are present in many cleaners at low toxicity levels.

"Some have been listed by sources such as the US Department of Labor as known carcinogens especially when mixed with other compounds in the atmosphere."

According to Mr Houghton-Brown, businesses are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers of some of these chemicals.

Clean Planet refuses to use VOCs, dyes and phosphates.

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CHECK UP

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Seeing a loved one can reduce pain

Forget morphine, new research shows that just seeing a photo of a loved one can reduce physical pain. A University of California Los Angeles study took 25 young women who had been in a happy relationship with a boyfriend for more than six months and tested their pain responses by applying "moderately painful" heat to their arms while they looked at photos of their boyfriend, a stranger and a chair. The women reported less pain from the heat when they were looking at their partner than when they looked at a stranger or a chair. In another experiment they reported less pain while holding hands with their boyfriend than when they held a stranger's hand or a squeeze ball.

... or you could try some mint tea

An ancient Brazilian herbal remedy has proven just as effective as a commercially available drug at relieving pain. For many centuries Brazilian healers have used *Hyptis crenata* (Brazilian mint) to treat a variety of ailments ranging from headaches to flu. Researchers at Newcastle University set out to accurately mimic the traditional method of use for the mint and found that it is most commonly consumed as a tea. Testing on mice, they found that when given in similar doses to those the healers prescribed, the tea was just as effective at relieving pain as an over-the-counter pain drug called Indometacin. Lead researcher Graciela Rocha pointed out that more than half of prescription drugs are based on a molecule that occurs naturally in a plant.

Dirt really is good

Parental lobby groups have been saying it for years and the evidence continues to support them – dirt is good. Scientists have found further evidence backing the "hygiene hypothesis," which claims that living in an overly clean environment can damage children's immune systems and leave them vulnerable to allergies. Scientists from the School of Medicine at University of California, San Diego have found that being too clean can impair the skin's ability to heal. They found a common species of bacteria known as *Staphylococcus* stops the process that leads to inflammation. It does this by preventing the immune system from over-reacting to minor cuts and grazes and swelling up unnecessarily. Their work is published in the online edition of *Nature Medicine*.

'Mental illness gene' identified

Scientists have uncovered another clue as to why some people are more prone to mental illness than others. An international team of scientists led by Edinburgh University has identified a gene that may play a role in the development of mental illnesses. The researchers compared the genes of 2000 psychiatric patients to those of 2000 healthy people. They found that the ABCA13 gene was more likely to be faulty in the psychiatric patients, who suffered severe psychological disorders such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and depression. The scientists believe the gene may affect the way fat molecules are used in brain cells. This discovery could potentially lead to treatments that deal with the faulty gene.

Suppressed workplace anger bad

Bottling up anger and frustration at work could be a bad idea if you're a man, according to a new Swedish study. The survey of 2755 men found that men who suppress their anger about unfair treatment at work are two to five times more likely to suffer a heart attack or die from heart disease than those who vent their frustration quickly. However, the researchers were unable to figure out the best way of letting off steam, finding similar results between men who said they yelled, protested their treatment directly, talked to the person right away or waited until the situation had calmed down before addressing the problem.

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT

Friday, 18 December

BEST WORKPLACES 2009

THE NATIONAL BUSINESS REVIEW
The Authority

In its final edition of 2009, NBR looks at where the best places to work in New Zealand were this year. The Best Workplaces 2009 report examines what ingredients make a healthy workplace environment. Will having an in-house gym improve worker happiness and

productivity? Is a multi-cultural office a recipe for success or conflict? Another focus will be the roles played by various government bodies such as OSH, EEO and ACC play in this area.

The report will also ask whether the vari-

ous workplace surveys are actually any use to businesses.

The dates and deadlines:

Publication Date: 18 December 2009

Booking Deadline: 11 December 2009

Material Deadline: 15 December 2009

If you would like to advertise in this special report, please contact Todd Scott: +64 (09) 912 2713 or email tscott@nbr.co.nz