





## Putting on a healthier, happier face.

*I had the pleasure of working alongside Edmonton physicians Jaggi and Namita Rao, to help them develop a new line of ultra-environmental, naturally sourced skin care products.*

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*By Vivienne O’Keeffe A.A.D., P.E.A.,  
C.I.B.T.A.C.*

For most people, the one-two punch of COVID-19 and global warming has added extra urgency to the way we treat the environment and our personal health.

Early adopters in this movement are eating less meat, switching from plastic bags



*Dr. Namita and Dr. Jaggi Rao, of eċōMD professional skincare line.*

to paper or reusable ones, and trading in their fuel-powered vehicles for electric. They're also taking a harder look at the makeup of products that go into or onto their bodies. In the case of skin care, it can mean reconsidering products that (however effective medically) can contain harsh-sounding ingredients like silicones, tetrasodium EDTA, chemically derived phenoxyethanol, butylene glycol and even microbeads of plastic.

In a casual conversation two years ago with family physician and geriatrician Dr. Namita Rao, we both raised concerns about the many chemical constituents in over-the-counter skincare products. Dr. Rao began asking herself if there might not be a way to reach health-conscious,

eco-savvy consumers with an ultra-clean, ultra-environmental new line of effective skin care products – one that would contain no toxins, use no animal testing, and be environmentally friendly right down to its glass jars and kraft paper packaging with vegetable-based inks. In my capacity as a spa business consultant, skin care expert and product developer, I advocate for cleaner and greener products and business practices, so I was able to join with Dr. Namita in her vision.

The answer arrived in the form of a whole new professional product line, eċōMD.

Originally a Gerontologist, Rao is hardly a stranger to skin care. In partnership with her husband Dr. Jaggi Rao – a board-certified dermatologist,

cosmetic surgeon and university lecturer – she owns and operates two clinics in their home town of Edmonton: Rao Dermatology and Activ MD Derm Spa.

Here are some questions I have been asked as I share this exciting alternative with other skincare professionals.

*Q:* What's different about eċōMD products?

*A:* What isn't? We set out to create an entire line of effective professional cosmetics that are as healthy and natural as possible – and with packaging that's also as environmentally friendly as possible. They particularly address the skin's delicate balance – homeostasis – and its microbiome.

The whole idea of microbiome protection alone is cutting-edge. Many of our ingredients have been proven in various cultures through many generations of trial and error. Willow bark extract, for example, is a natural, anti-microbial source of salicylic acid for exfoliating without irritation. Green tea, resveratrol and ginseng are natural antioxidants. Bakuchiol is a non-irritating, well tolerated natural equivalent to retinol (Vitamin A1). Another thing that distinguishes eċōMD products is their high concentration of active ingredients. Higher concentrations mean more effective results.

*Q:* But aren't there already products that address concerns about skin health and the environment?

*A:* There is a huge movement towards clean skincare products, yes. Sephora and

others are coming out with cleaner product lines as more and more consumers demand them. But most over-the-counter products are not designed to treat the skin, they're designed to be comfortable and nice. The eċōMD line is the first non-toxic, environmental line of products formulated for professionals to treat specific skin conditions such as skin aging, acne, rosacea, peri-menopausal and menopausal skin to name a few.

*Q:* How did the idea of starting eċōMD originate?

*A:* I was helping the Raos with a concept for their new dermatology spa, and was chatting one day with (Dr.) Namita. Skin care is a huge passion of mine, and I was telling her that what really concerns me are the toxins in personal care products, even in the professional end of the market. They have a daughter and two young sons, and her daughter loves makeup and spending time in Sephora as many young people do. I brought up the topic of the toxicity of some of the ingredients, especially their endocrine-disrupting effects. As a physician and mother, she was concerned and agreed a new ultra-healthy, environmentally benign products would appeal to many of today's consumers. She was especially convinced after watching the CBC documentary Toxic Beauty by Phyllis Ellis. In fact, I think that was the catalyst for her. She decided we had to start offering healthier options in the professional sector – something that had never been done before. She came up with the name 'eċōMD' and a clear vision of the look

and feel of the packaging, to demonstrate its values.

*Q:* So the products were not really consumer-driven?

*A:* Actually, they were mainly driven by a very concerned mom!

*Q:* But there are products with proven medical ingredients in use all over the world aren't there? Those ingredients can't be all bad.

*A:* There's no question that many conventional professional products play an important role in skin care and are very effective. Some cases of acne, for example, are so severe that compromises may need to be made in terms of the medication required in combination with topical treatments. But these products can cause long-term damage to the delicate microbiome of your gut and your skin. If the acne is mild, the results of our products are fantastic. I've seen the results firsthand.

*Q:* Does it cost more to make a good product?

*A:* Yes it does, especially to get the right raw ingredients. But the Raos' motivation wasn't about cost. As they are physicians, it was about efficacy and results.

*Q:* So *ēcōMD* cost more to buy than other products?

*A:* Actually no, the price points are similar.

*Q:* What is the Raos' vision for *ēcōMD*?

*A:* The Raos' intention is that adding the *ēcōMD* line to spas and skincare clinics across

Canada will give professionals a cleaner, healthier, more environmentally friendly alternative for those clients who may have felt excluded by the values of existing professional skincare lines.

*Q:* Will *ēcōMD* be sold directly to clients as well as in spas?

*A:* No, they will be sold strictly to professional spas and clinics. The pandemic has shown us what can happen to the retail side of the spa business as a consequence of shut downs. The Raos' *medispa*, for example, was closed for several months and had no income, so clients using cosmeceuticals and other skincare products simply bought them online. This leaves the spa without income and the client without the guidance of a professional therapist or clinician. That's a lose-lose situation. The Raos are adamant about supporting the professional channels. It will take time for the products to become known and accepted, but the benefit will be repeat sales.

*Q:* What were the challenges in developing a new product line?

*A:* Doing it during a pandemic was certainly a challenge. Supply chain problems made it very difficult to get packaging. Our bottles are all recyclable glass, so not as readily available as plastic bottles. Even with the pandemic now winding down sourcing packaging remains an issue. The raw ingredients are also difficult to source, and they come from around the world.

*Q:* How do you know your products are safe?

*A:* Every *ēcōMD* product uses plant-based ingredients and natural and enzyme preservatives wherever possible. No toxins. It's very important, for example, to avoid a sunscreen that doesn't promote skin health. Chemicals can be easily absorbed into the body through the pores, especially on a hot day, to the point where the chemicals in some sunscreens can sometimes be more damaging than wearing no sunscreen at all. Our sun protection product is a 30 SPF physical (not chemical) very high quality zinc oxide sunscreen. And it has a lovely light tint – I'm wearing it right now. Every product we make is carefully tested by an independent lab using best practices for stability, microbial action and safety.

*Q:* How are you planning on marketing the *ēcōMD* line?

*A:* Our preliminary approach will be word of mouth. We want to partner with like-minded professionals – serious skincare clinicians, *medispas* and dermatologists who are as concerned as we are about healthy skin and a healthy environment. We also have a website: [www.ecomdskincare.com](http://www.ecomdskincare.com). Our plan is to launch in Canada, then around the world. We'll see



*A sampling of the eco-friendly ecōMD professional skincare line.  
Photographer: Paul Joseph.*

how Canada goes first. Once we start making inroads, we'll do more marketing. Our products are very unique and provide an exciting new option for professionals and spa consumers.

Vivienne O'Keeffe, AAD, PEA, CIBTAC, is President of Spa Profits Consulting Inc., and an expert in designing successful spa concepts. She is also an international consultant in developing product lines, treatment plans and training programs, a member of ISPA and a recipient of the Spa Industry Association of Canada Outstanding Industry Service Award in 2001, 2005 and 2012.



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