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Eco

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Cleaning with toxins isn't really cleaning

Modern products are full of harmful chemicals. But there are natural alternatives, **Nick Galvin** finds.

Michael Girowal did not start his working life as an eco warrior. Far from it. He was in real estate, fielding calls from a constant cycle of tenants complaining that the products their cleaners had used left them with headaches, allergies or an increase in their asthma symptoms. Girowal sensed a niche, and in June last year Green Clean Australia was born.

Not wanting to leave anything to chance, he developed a 24-step cleaning program to ensure each job was done to his clients' satisfaction. Green Clean Australia's two-person teams now travel to 10 workplaces and more than 100 homes across Sydney equipped with backpack vacuums containing HEPA filters, commercial-grade microfibre cloths and thorough training in how to get things clean - really clean - while minimising negative environmental effects.

"A conventional cleaning service would come in with a toilet cleaner, surface cleaner, window cleaner, glass cleaner, and so it continues," Girowal says. "All have some harmful ingredients. We use only two products: a sanitising spray and a multipurpose cleaner. The multipurpose cleaner is particularly green, containing no volatile organic compounds and no acids. It's a plant-based product that completely biodegrades within 21 days."

It is not just those hiring cleaners who are turning towards more eco-friendly cleaning solutions. In the past 12 months more than 800 Sydneysiders attended workshops at the Watershed Sustainability Re-

DIY natural housework

■ The Watershed Sustainability Resource Centre (a joint initiative of Marrickville and City of Sydney councils) runs free, two-hour workshops on natural cleaning and home detox twice a month. Book well in advance by emailing watershedinfo@marrickville.nsw.gov.au.

■ Have someone else do it: www.greenclean.com.au or 1300 234 7336.

■ Prices vary for individual jobs, but expect to pay about \$50-\$60 for a one-bedroom apartment, and \$70-\$90 for a standard three-bedroom house.

source Centre, where natural cleaning and home detox workshops are so popular they fill weeks in advance.

"Cost is one motivation. Natural cleaning is cheap," says Watershed's manager, Kalina Coloff. "Plus we see a really strong eco motivation, people who are not wanting to contribute to a build-up of toxic residues, and are committed to reducing the waste water and toxic loads leaving their homes. People are also motivated that by using natural cleaning products, particularly detergents and stuff for washing machines, they can re-use some of their grey water on garden beds."

At the commercial end, health benefits are the most apparent



Michael Girowal ... uses just two products, a sanitising spray and a multipurpose cleaner. Photo: Edwina Pickles

motivator for Green Clean Australia's clients. "Our clients comment on the immediate reduction in allergic reactions and frequency of asthma attacks," Girowal says.

There is, however, a process of education. "Green cleaning absolutely does get stuff clean. But our products don't contain chemical brighteners that give the nice shiny look we are used to with commercial cleaning products," he says.

Shannon Lush, co-author of the cleaning bestseller *Spotless* (it has sold 300,000 copies), agrees that natural cleaning solutions require a shift in perception.

"They usually work better than

what you buy in the supermarket. But Australians are under the impression you need the smell of chlorine for things to be clean. If there's any smell after you finish, it's not clean, because you've left a layer of residue behind."

"The obscure language on chemicals keeps people confused. Most of us go to the supermarket, look at the bewildering array of products, and think 'how can I tell?'" Lush says.

Professor Chris Winder, a toxicologist at the University of NSW, agrees that labelling on cleaning products is confusing for the average consumer. "There's almost a deliberate attempt by companies to obscure what the products really contain," he says.

Winder believes commercially produced "natural cleaners" aren't always as safe as they propound to be, "but generally they are better than what they replace".

Craig Brock, from ACCORD, an advocate for the consumer, cosmetic, hygiene and specialty products industries, says that consumers are increasingly demanding greener products and that the industry will continue focusing on this goal. But he warns that: "Given today's busy lifestyles, very few of us can devote the time to cleaning chores that our grandmothers did. Using hours of elbow grease is just not a realistic option for most people."