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Toxic toys, bad vibrations

The booming sex toy industry is largely unregulated. Can it ensure its products are safe enough for a growing customer base?

By: Samantha Lee

On a brisk fall morning, I sat down at my desk, a steaming cup of Earl Grey by my side. I turned on my laptop. And I proceeded to search for the worst sex toy I could find.

By “worst,” I meant “most defective.” More specifically, I was looking for a sex toy that would prove a point, it being: some of these things, which one might occasionally stick into one’s body, should *not* be stuck into one’s body. Wayward products have been known to break, or poison, or electrocute one – sometimes *during use*.

The most efficient way to find the world’s ickiest toy: on the Internet’s lawless consumer frontier, Amazon.com. I started scrolling.

While it comes as a surprise to no one that most adult *homo sapiens* have engaged in the formal act of copulation, research indicates that more of us than we think play with toys, too. Recent studies found that 45 percent of men in the U.S., and more than half of women, have previously incorporated a vibrator into sexual play. Another study of over 25,000 men who identify as gay or bisexual found that almost 80 percent have used at least one of the following: dildos, cock rings, vibrators, butt plugs, masturbation sleeves, and anal beads.

Mankind has been amenable to sticking borderline unsavory things up oneself since at least the Stone Age in the name of pleasure. The oldest known dildo – a 28,000-year-old stone member – doubled up as a flint for lighting fires. The ancient Greeks and Egyptians molded members out of camel dung and coated them in resin before insertion. In Victorian times, doctors used a steam-powered, coal-fired behemoth of a machine called the “Manipulator” to bring women to orgasm as a cure for “hysteria.”

Our primal penchant for pleasure manifests itself today in the vast and booming industry of sex toys. Global sales currently stand at \$15 billion, and are projected to reach \$50 billion by 2020. That’s approximately the GDP of Bulgaria.

And yet, despite sex toys’ ubiquity in the boudoir, no local or federal authorities have taken on the mantle of regulating the safety of sex toys. The government has so far desisted from dipping its wick into the murky depths of the industry.

Maybe it should, I thought. As I navigated my way through the 32,635 dildos, 32,166 anal sex toys, and leg-buckling 133,473 vibrators available for One-Click Purchase on Amazon, there were not an insignificant number of suspect ones. I

don't just mean the veiny appendages, dubious dolls, and rubber orifices molded to resemble other orifices that began to erode my faith in humanity.

I mean the Uncut Emperor (Ivory, rated 3 stars), reviewed by a user as having a "slight smell, but really only noticeable if you stick your nose up to it." Another proclaimed: "Avoid this dildo! It melted!"

I mean the CalExotics Teardrop Bullet, Pink, whose exposed wires gave a 16-year-old girl "a series of strong and painful shocks" to her fingers as she prepared to use it on her genitals.

I mean, too, the "Rbenxia Soft Realistic Dildo Vibrating Vibration Vibrator G-Spot Stimulate Orgasmic Magic Wand", an earthworm-pink toy, thickly veined and made with a plastic that puckered unnaturally.

"SMELLED SO BAD! CHEMICALS! HAD FUZZ AND HAIRS ALL OVER IT!" screamed one reviewer. "Broke off in girlfriend's vagina," penned another. Apparently, the toy also "fuses to your underwear."

In 2015, an estimated 1,657 people sought out the emergency room for injuries caused by "massage devices and vibrators," according to the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS), an annual database of consumer-reported injuries caused by electrical gadgets.

Some of the devices were ostensibly non-sexual in nature, such as the "massage device" that "rubbed skin off toe" of a 73-year-old female. But the sweeping majority of cases appeared to be caused by wayward toys having their way with their owners and embedding themselves into orifices. The entries, with haiku-like brevity, read typically like: "57 YOM. Rectal pain inserted dildo up his rectum, sucked up into his rectum, unable to remove."

But even ickier were the reports from sex educators and toy reviewers about toxic plasticizers that lurked within some toys. One sex blogger and toy reviewer, who goes by the name of Pantophile Panic, writes on her blog about the "extreme headaches, nausea, lower back pain, and severe discomfort when urinating" that arose from using cheap products she'd bought online. The symptoms, she writes, developed into a urinary tract infection that spread to her kidneys. Repeated emails to her, however, went unheeded.

As a sex toy consumer myself, I was outraged. The toys made to be inserted in our bodily orifices – the dildos, vibrators, vibrating dildos, butt plugs, Kegel balls, G-spot massagers, cock rings, and countless others – these could be manufactured with impunity by big faceless corporations bearing names like Nastoy and California Exotics? And the government, who cared what we ate and what toy trains our children played with and what fertilizers went into our tomatoes, didn't care about what we inserted into our bodies?

In a way, the Rbenxia was perfect. With it as my sword, I would hack my way into the shady recesses of governmental regulation. Beckon to the sex educators and researchers trying to get better sex toys out there. Prod at the manufacturers screwing with their – our! – toys. I'd smite down the twin towers of an indifferent government and an insidious industry, in the name of humanity's largest obsession. That, at least, was the plan.

I added it to my cart, and clicked "Proceed to Checkout."

In 2004, Crista Anne worked as an "outlaw dildo peddler" in a store in Texas. She was 23 years old. At the time, a state law banning the sale of sex toys was in effect, so the store ostensibly sold "cake toppers," "gag gifts," "novelty items," and personal massagers to be used anywhere on the body but the genitalia.

"If someone came into the store and called a vibrator, a vibrator, it was my job to tell them to leave," she told me in a Skype interview.

It was a tough time for adult toys and their adult purveyors. People would protest outside the shop, the same way some do outside abortion clinics today. Products would come leaching chemicals and off-gassing out of their boxes. Crista Anne, who took her job seriously, took it upon herself to battery-test the products she ordered for the store. She ended with rashes on her arms; allergic reactions; hives -- all this through the gloves she wore while handling donges.

A caveat: she has extremely sensitive skin, and that was 12 years ago. Today, sex toys aren't outlawed in Texas any longer, and adult stores are no longer dubbed "sticky floor stores." After the 90s hit sitcom *Sex and the City* made it cool to spend Saturday nights at home with a Rabbit, cultural taboos around sex toys started melting away. The general quality and range of products has improved.

But not all that vibrates well is gold. Without regulatory structures in place, toys can be produced with any cocktail of chemical compounds. Manufacturers can slap nice-sounding words on packaging – "body-safe," "medical-grade silicon," "phthalate-free" – and we have to take their word for it. Many products are labeled "for novelty use only," a convenient legal hedge against displeased customers threatening to sue for a faulty or toxic item. If you go around sticking a "novelty product" in your nether regions, so the logic goes, it's entirely your fault if bad things happen.

One ingredient found in some adult toys is phthalates, an organic compound used to make plastic soft and flexible. My Rbenxia probably harbored some. When a material containing phthalates is exposed to higher temperatures or UV rays, it can break down and release the phthalate in the form of a gas. A Danish

study conducted in 2006 found that two-thirds of sex toys tested contained phthalates in varying concentrations.

The chemical is labeled “toxic” by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), a federal agency that protects the public from product-induced injuries. The FDA bans phthalates in medical devices and children’s toys. A known endocrine disruptor, some of its studied effects include short and long-term toxic effects on the liver, kidneys, uterus, ovaries, and to fetuses.

Some nuance here: the FDA does regulate genital devices, but only those marketed as medical aids. It has cleared about 86 external penile rigidity devices (translation: penis pumps), 64 Kegel-strengthening products, and four genital vibrators intended to treat sexual dysfunction. A spokesperson from the agency told me that they “do not regulate products meant purely for sexual pleasure.”

The CPSC, too, carries out its brand of “regulation” as an after-market surveyor that responds to customer complaints. Enough serious complaints on a particular product, and the CPSC will investigate and remove it from store shelves.

What this means: a critical number of people just have to be hurt by sex toys *and* report their cases before anything changes. Seemed promising enough, until I paid a visit to SaferProducts.gov, the CPSC’s public database where consumers can report on products gone awry. A grand total of three such reports popped up when I searched for “sex toys” – hardly a blip in the thousands of injuries reported each year.

“Despite the decreasing stigma around sex toys, there’s still a certain amount of shame when it comes to talking about using them,” offered Crista Anne. Today, she has moved on from illicit dildo selling. She’s now a sex educator and blogger. In 2013, she started Dildology, an independent non-profit organization that sends sex toys for third party lab testing. The motto: *In Dildo Veritas*. The goal: to match the claims on toy packaging to the materials in the toys.

The noble enterprise proved challenging. Lab testing ran up to about \$700 per toy. Crista Anne had to convince stores to donate toys for testing (she didn’t accept toys from manufacturers). Of the two toys Dildology managed to test before it went on hiatus, one caused a big industry kerfuffle.

Dildology failed Doc Johnson’s James Deen Realistic Cock, claiming that it contained bis(2-ethylhexylhexahydrophthalate) – a type of phthalate.

Doc Johnson refuted the claim a few days later in a letter, writing that “the sample material was incorrectly labeled and identified.” Their lifelike member, in fact, was “made with the same plasticizers used in cardiac catheters, blood bags, and medical devices worldwide.” The company had switched to non-phthalate plasticizers in 2008.

Still, for Crista Anne, getting the pleasure product behemoth to release the ingredients in its materials was a big deal. “I consider it a win,” she said.

Dildology is about half a year away from a re-launch. Why the dedication to doing something so difficult, and expensive, and thankless? Why not just urge the FDA to do its job?

“I’d rather we, as in the industry, police ourselves,” said Crista Anne. Her tone was protective, like a mother hen overlooking a brood of little cocks. Having the government judge whether or not products deserved to be on the market could suppress the availability of these items. Nipple clamps could be identified as unsuitable; restraints labeled as dangerous. The kink and BDSM worlds would start being judged for their preferences. All the work that sex educators like Crista Anne had been doing to encourage acceptance of sex toys and masturbation could unravel overnight.

Crista Anne didn’t want the government nosing around in her bedroom.

Two days after I clicked “Purchase,” my new member appeared on my doorstep. I brought it to my room, locked the door, and unwrapped it. On the carton, an image of the Rbenxia and a buff male model jostled for space. A trio of Chinese characters proclaimed: “White Horse Prince.”

Thankfully, no hair or fuzz coated the dildo, though it did squeak disturbingly against its plastic wrapping as I pulled it out. The smell could best be described as “My Little Pony meets maraschino cherry.”

Briefly, I contemplated the logistics of using the thing. People had bought the Rbenxia, stuffed it up their bodies, and lived to comment on Amazon. Surely I could do so, in the name of discovery?

I placed two fresh batteries in; turned it on. No hint of a vibration. Not without relief, I concluded that the Rbenxia was useless. At this point, regulating wonky products and preventing them from ever penetrating the marketplace seemed a no-brainer.

It was time to check in with the authorities.

I gave the city of West Hollywood, California – one of the U.S.’s most sexually progressive, sex positive zip codes – a call. Joshua Schare, the city’s public information officer, informed me gently that “there has never been any ordinance or legislation to look at the safety of sex toys” in the city or county.

And if concerned citizens wanted to campaign for safer adult products?

“It would take a while.”

Schare mentioned the city’s 2013 landmark Fur Ban, which prohibits the sale of fur apparel. That took more than six years – “approximately” – of work.

So we were talking years of tireless lobbying?

“Yeah. I just don’t see any any of that happening anytime soon.”

And yet, I knew that the government didn’t completely deny the industry of sexual pleasure. In fact, its ongoing crackdown on personal lubricants was irritating the industry.

But I knew not much else about it, except that they were innocuous bottles of K-Y Jelly shoved unceremoniously into bedside drawers. So I went to Kira Manser to understand the possible effects of regulation on the industry. A sort of lube-as-litmus-test conversation.

Manser is the executive director at The Center for Sexual Pleasure and Health in Rhode Island and self-described “anal advocate.” Serendipitously, she was holding an hour-long class titled “Choose Your Own Sexual Adventure: How to Decide on the Right Lubricant” at a sexual health conference in Brooklyn.

I had to go. Before the talk even started, people had filled the seats and lined the sides of the room. Manser stood in front of a table, in knee-high boots, a lace dress, and blue-tinted hair curtaining the unshorn side of her head. An array of bottles – and roll of kitchen towels – sat on the table, with names like Jo’s Natural Love Lubricant with Chamomile (USDA-certified organic), and Pink Natural Water-based Lubricant (fortified with organic aloe vera and extracts of ginseng).

Lubricants have evolved considerably from their greasy predecessors. Randy ancient Greeks and Romans would turn to their household panacea: olive oil. In the Edo period, the Japanese oiled animal intestine condoms with tororo-jiru, a sticky substance from grated yams. The Chinese and Koreans boiled seaweeds to produce a slick liquid, called carrageenan.

With the advent of K-Y Jelly, the first commercially produced lubricant, in 1903, we finally stopped mixing kitchen ingredients with bedroom ones. In 2012, the U.S lubricant market was estimated at \$219 million.

Which partly explained the vast globs of information Manser was doling out. She held forth on the relative pros and cons of silicon-based lube and water-based lube and plant oil-based lube. We learned about osmolality (a product’s tendency to dehydrate one’s skin) and pH values (too acidic, bad; too alkaline, also bad).

“Did you know that students in med school get less than 10 hours of sexual education throughout their programs?” Manser declaimed, to low whistles and clicks of disbelief.

What I didn’t know, either, was that K-Y Jelly, along with other popular brands like Astroglide, ranked outrageously low on her litany of lubes. According to the detailed and colorful graphic on lubricant osmolality values Manser projected onscreen, K-Y Warming Jelly was more than 35 times as osmotic as vaginal mucus. It would suck out all the moisture and joy out of one’s genital membranes, damaging vaginal linings and causing irritation. In contrast, Good Clean Love’s Almost Naked Organic Personal Lubricant, made with aloe vera and seaweed, is less osmotic than vaginal mucus, eliminating the danger of scorched skin.

What’s more, one of K-Y Jelly’s ingredients, propylene glycol, has been shown to damage the body’s mucosal membrane, increasing the possibility of STI transmission.

“Just, *yeurgh*,” said Manser.

The Jelly is not unique. Other popular brands in the lube world have similar chemical compositions. Recent studies variously suggest that common ingredients in commercial lubricants can increase susceptibility to transmission of genital herpes and HIV and damage the vagina’s natural flora.

And yet, bigger lubricant companies squirm through FDA’s regulations. K-Y Jelly’s century-long hegemonic market presence, and parent company Johnson & Johnson at its back, has allowed it to jump through FDA’s testing and certification hoops, which can cost up to \$200,000. This fee effectively shuts out smaller, independent companies from the market. Ironically, the indie companies are the ones making good-for-body lubes in the first place.

“In my perfect world,” said Manser, as I met up with her after the class, “FDA’s procedures should be more informed by people who have sexual health and pleasure as their professional vocation. Unfortunately, that’s not the case right now.”

She paused for a moment. “I do wish that regulations reflected safety, as opposed to privilege.”

Turns out that regulation doesn’t necessarily mean safer or better adult products for us all. Consumer education and awareness about the products we’re rubbing into our intimate parts, Manser said, are more important.

As she passed bottles of the good lube around, we smeared them on our hands. A lady in her forties next to me sniffed her fingers. I followed suit, detecting hints of coconut in one; the soothing scent of chamomile in another.

“Lick them!” encouraged Manser, while handing out kitchen towels. And so we licked the lube. Then we wiped our sticky hands dry, and headed out into the brisk fall day smelling of tropical fruit.

The government was starting to seem less like a benevolent parent and more like the absentminded uncle who stops by the house only on holidays and forgets your name. My expectations had been naïve. Historically, federal protection of the populace-as-consumer from poisoning itself hasn't exactly been, shall we say, on the ball.

The FDA itself had to be coerced into existence – through the willful poisoning of a band of 12 strapping young men, aka the Poison Squad.

In 1902, chief chemist of the Bureau of Chemistry Harvey Wiley hired a group of amenable men as human guinea pigs to test food preservatives. The “young men of perfect physique and health” were variously described as “vigorous” and “voracious. One was a former Yale sprinter; another a well regarded scientist.

Each night, the bowtie-clad and besuited men sat down to dinners around a table laid with the best silverware and a gourmet meal laced with chemicals like formaldehyde. For five years, they volunteered their stomachs and health to the federal government, ingesting chicken spiked with borax or asparagus tinged with benzoate.

Like all martyrs, the Poison Squad was immortalized in song; in this case, a catchy little ditty by one S.W Gillian:

*On prussic acid we break our fast
We lunch on morphine stew
We dine with a matchhead consommé
Drink carbolic acid brew.*

By 1907, five years later, long-term exposure to dubious chemicals took its toll. Reports observed them on a “slow approach towards death.” But not for nothing – their sacrifice led to the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, and the formation of the FDA in the same year.

And then there was the issue of household poisons. If I ever expected the government to take a good hard look at toxic sex toys as a real threat in the bedroom, a quick peek at the history of federal mandates on household poisons

scrubbed out any residual hope. When it came to non-prescription products, the government has taken an even more laissez-faire approach.

Apothecaries and pharmacies in 17th century America sold poisons – the prussic acid, morphia, arsenic and corrosive sublimate that one occasionally needed – in fastidiously designed bottles to differentiate them from others. Bottles were irregularly shaped, made with rough-textured material, and even fixed with spikes.

But the advent of mass consumption in the early 20th century led to a deluge of mass-produced chemicals into the household. Brand-name products such as Parson's Ammonia, Old English Floor Wax and Wright's Silver Cream stocked the average homemaker's shelves, bedecked in the bright, attractive hues of marketing and dangerously bereft of poison warnings.

These posed new dangers for handsy children and inattentive parents. An alarming number of kids started dying from inadvertent poisoning. In the era of muckraking journalists and Progressive reformers, Upton Sinclair and relentless scrutiny of negligent industries – this regulatory oversight was enough to whip physicians and homemakers into a frenzy.

And yet, more than two decades transpired before the passing of the Caustic Poison Act in 1926. Finally, warnings on poisonous household products had to be written in large gothic capital letters, against a “clear, plain background of a distinctly contrasting color” with “directions for treatment in case of accidental personal injury.”

Similarly, despite long-standing proposals to add coloring to white powdered pesticides, nothing happened until 50 patients were fatally poisoned at Oregon State Hospital in 1942. An unwitting cook had cooked up the daily scramble with a pinch of sodium fluoride – a common insecticide – instead of powdered milk. In 1947, the government finally enacted the Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, which mandated proper labeling and coloring of products containing poisonous chemicals.

Fun fact – large pesticide manufacturers took a disproportionate interest in drafting the Act. They supported blanket regulation, which would drive out smaller competitors by imposing a regulatory burden that smaller manufacturers wouldn't be able to bear. Sound familiar?

Not five years later, a toddler and 11 other people died from ingesting carbon tetrachloride, found in cleaning products. Only then did the New York City Board of Health galvanize into action, requiring manufacturers to include a warning label on products containing the chemical.

All of which is to say: If one were to compare the hidden dangers of toxic, poorly labeled sex toys to the hidden dangers of toxic, poorly labeled household products, one could very quickly determine that people have to expire from infected genitalia before the feds step in.

Perhaps *Good Housekeeping*, eminent magazine for homemakers and the last word on domestic affairs way back in 1902, had it right.

“One should stick a pin in the cork from top to side or directly through from side to side,” instructed an article on properly denoting bottles containing poisonous chemicals. “So that in touching the cork you will surely feel the pin.”

The responsibility for preventing accidental calamities at home fell on the people who lived in it – and not on the government.

I didn't go so far as to stick a pin in the Rbenxia, but I did bring it with me to the Sexual Health Expo, an annual trade-consumer conference for adult products. Among the young women and smaller abundance of po-faced men milling around the sprawling warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, I would hold toy manufacturers to account with my turgid sword.

The fair, which markets itself as an “upscale event”, is where the industry's best and brightest preen their peens. I rolled phalluses made of healing crystals (Chakrubs) in my palms. There were boxes that emit UV rays specifically to zap microbes out of sex toys. Disposable masturbation sleeves from Japanese company Tenga were packaged in egg-shaped containers. (These are called Egg Beaters.)

I met the old: the \$1,300, 30-year-old Sybian, a mountable mechanical box I can best describe as a bedroom bucking bronco. And the new: the Eva, a friendly hands-free vibrator with little bendy wings, which tuck away neatly into a lady's vulva during intercourse.

I had the feeling that my Rbenxia would be quite out of place. I whipped it out in front of Alexandra Fine, CEO of Dame Products and inventor of the Eva.

“Oh my god!” Fine wore a white linen top and gold-rimmed glasses. A messy braid trailed down her back. She reminded me of a college roommate. “I actually kind of like the color!”

She sniffed it; wrinkled her nose. Politely changed tack. “You know, my first vibrator caught on fire,” she said. It was cheap; about twenty bucks. It didn't work after she put in batteries.

“And you know, when you’re in the mood for a vibrator to work, you *need* it to work.” So she tried to fix it, by twisting some wires together. A spark ignited, and the thing burst into flames. The first step towards the eventual birth of Dame, whose motto is “Making the world better, one vagina at a time.”

When I floated the idea of more governmental incursion into their company, Janet Lieberman, Dame’s co-founder and technological sorceress, took over. “For us, right now, not being regulated certainly makes things easier for us,” she said. “Otherwise, it’d be more expensive, and take us more time to bring products to market.”

My other encounters pretty much cleaved to the same trajectory – nose-wrinkling at the Rbenxia; even more at the idea of regulation.

“Nah,” said Reed Baumgartem. He makes the CuRious Wand, the world’s first antimicrobial personal massager made out of a copper alloy. A background in livestock breeding instilled him with a deep and intimate knowledge of stimulating bull prostates to induce ejaculation, as well as the necessary access to industry-grade metals.

“We’ve been doing fine for thirty years without regulation,” said Bunny Lampert, who sported a well-coiffed head of grey hair and a pearl necklace. Lampert’s father, Dave, invented the Sybian. Despite looking like a lawsuit waiting to happen, no one has reported any mishaps with the product throughout considerable history.

Funnily enough, I seemed to have stumbled into a libertarian’s wet dream. The sex toy universe was a thriving free market. It was merrily self-regulating. I recalled a conversation with Arvin Vorha, the vice-chair of the Libertarian Party.

“Regulations will only make sex toys more expensive, and encourage people to switch to lower quality toys, decreasing safety,” he told me. “Regulations add to cost. The result: fewer startups, less variety, less innovation.”

I was coming to grasp that the sex toy industry was like the female orgasm. It’s extremely complex, forthcoming when coaxed, but averse to excessive meddling.

Manufacturers were making safer products, responsibly. None of the toys I handled – not the Eva, the CuRious Wand, or the Sybian – were tainted with the “For Novelty Use Only” label.

Companies are taking a long hard look at themselves. Doc Johnson, once synonymous with cheap jelly dildos, just won a product award for the Tryst, a sleek, silicon-encased marvel that can be worn up to 11 different ways. This year, Screaming O, another company that sells “entry-level” vibrating cock rings,

started sending its own products for lab tests to ensure that all materials present are safe for use in the body. It's the first in the business to do so.

By the end of the day, I was caught up with the latest happenings in sex toy land. A rust-red Iroha vibrator had caught my eye. It was soft and squishy, molded into the sweeping contours of a nesting dove. One could easily mistake it for an art piece. I made a mental note to purchase it the next time I was on the market for vibrator.

When I got home, I wrapped the Rbenxia up, and threw it out in the trash.