

**Finding the right balance with skin care:  
Reviewing James Hamblin's *Clean:  
The New Science of Skin***

James Hamblin. 2020. Riverhead Books. 280 pages.  
\$20.49. ISBN: 9780525538318.

In a pandemic more than ever, we are extra-conscious about infection. However, microbes play essential roles. How do we strike the right balance, fending off bad infections yet preserving life-sustaining bacteria?

Surely, all practicing dermatologists see how people laboriously overwash and scrub themselves to little benefit and then top it off with complicated, expensive, and borderline scam skin care regimens. However, is it fair to critique skin care if, for some people, as consumer luxury goods, they do add value?

Dr James Hamblin, a preventive medicine physician and writer for *The Atlantic*, takes us through history: fascinating tales of sanitation's rise (crediting Central Park's Olmsted and Florence Nightingale) and the industrial revolution of soap (and how soap was promoted for eugenics and race cleansing), with entertaining factoids (how "soap operas" were for selling soap—eg, *Guiding Light* was owned by Proctor and Gamble until ending in 2009). Hamblin explores the "hygiene hypothesis" through the Amish's greater exposure to farming and lower allergy incidence. During ancient plagues, the lack of basic sanitation was abhorrent, but today, we may have overcorrected, with oversterilized environments possibly predisposing us to allergies.

Hamblin has a whimsical approach. He dares to avoid taking showers. In a John Oliver—like scheme, he compounds his own skin care line (Brunson and Sterling) and convincingly shows the hypocrisy of companies evading regulation while touting their products as panaceas (eg, cannabidiol).

There are missed opportunities—Hamblin doesn't examine anti-aging, hair removal, or sun protection. Although he interviewed dermatologists and skin researchers, many details of dermatology are misleadingly presented. For instance, concepts shared as new are, in fact, decades-old common knowledge, such as *Demodex* mites in skin.

In the end, as Toni Morrison asked, is beauty a necessity and not an indulgence? I agree that pursuing self-care and good appearance is not all about vanity—indeed, research affirms the value of many cosmetic procedures improving quality of life. However, this book effectively demonstrates how a mostly unregulated industry manipulates and scams the public of billions of dollars, all while co-opting the name of health and wellness.

With COVID-19, the balance between natural and clean remains challenging, and although written before the pandemic, *Clean* reminds us of the importance of moderation and balance in a time of extremes.

*Jules B. Lipoff, MD  
Philadelphia, PA*

**Conflicts of interest**  
None disclosed.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2021.01.075>