



**NARELLE
CHENERY, 37,**
organic
cosmetics guru

She is Australia's queen of organic cosmetics, overseeing a \$15 million label that now exports to 30 countries, but it's far from palatial inside the Gold Coast headquarters of Narelle Chenery's skincare empire. Her ONEgroup factory – which produces the Miessence range of certified organic cleansers, moisturisers and masks – is in the industrial heartland of Nerang, her office a surprisingly tiny and nondescript loft space perched above the production floor.

"You can see it's not extravagant in here," Chenery laughs, gesturing to her desk, a busy workstation hidden by piles of papers in the corner. An identical desk tucked into the opposite corner belongs to fellow company director Colin Chenery, who left his job in drug and alcohol counselling nine years ago to help his wife manage the huge demand for Miessence.

Chenery is not embarrassed by the modest surrounds: she is a woman of substance, not glitter. She wants to educate women about the potential dangers of chemicals in cosmetics, and the success of the label internationally in the past five years – the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Japan are now its top importers – is proof that her feelgood message is spreading.

"But there is still so much to do," says Chenery, a striking blonde whose youthful, blemish-free skin is a walking advertisement for her products and philosophy. "Big companies that are creating these chemical-based products have no motivation to change while consumers are continuing to buy their products. The only way we are really going to make a positive change on this planet is through informed consumer power."

"Greenwashing" – a tactic whereby products are spruiked as being environmentally friendly when the claims can't be proven – is Chenery's favourite topic; she speaks about the issue at expos and conferences around the world. "Natural is booming, organic is booming, you walk into a health food store and everything is organic these days but the vast majority is crap," she says.

Chenery's entrepreneurial success began almost by accident. In 1994, pregnant with her first child in her honours year at uni (she has an applied science degree in information management from Melbourne's Deakin University), she abandoned the books and instead began working as a party-plan seller for a natural skincare range. But after doing research on the products Chenery was selling – specifically their ingredients – she was horrified

to discover the "natural" goods weren't so raw. "Not only were the ingredients that claimed to be natural not natural because of the chemical process they went through, but a lot of the chemicals and processing aids used to create the end product were actually quite toxic, and that was a major shock for me."

Chenery quit the company, searching the internet, department stores and health food outlets for an alternative. She found none with integrity. "I thought, 'Well, here's an opportunity, what if I could create something that was absolutely pure and had no synthetic chemicals, no toxins in it whatsoever?'"

Chenery, then 25, started experimenting in her kitchen, concocting creams and lotions infused with ingredients such as clove oil, mint leaves and lemon peel. At first she just gave them to relatives and friends as gifts. Buoyed by the positive feedback, she launched them into the marketplace two years later, in 1998. She based a mail-order business from home (on the Gold Coast, where her husband had taken a job in counselling) and submitted articles about her philosophies to health magazines. Within the first year she had a turnover of \$60,000.

Organic company scout Alf Orpen came on board as a business partner, convinced Chenery to get the products certified organic and in 2001 the company owned the world's first range of organic skincare products certified to food standards. The company claims it remains the only one in Australia and one of only a few in the world. It means, Chenery says, that all the ingredients can be eaten. It seems a bizarre boast but it's at the heart of her message: everything women put on their skin can be, and is, absorbed. If their cosmetics are full of chemicals "it is basically like eating small amounts of chemicals every day".

"One in three people in Australia will get some form of cancer in their life," she says. "Seventy years ago cancer rates were about one in 90 – we didn't use a lot of chemicals in those days, our grandparents used to wash their hair with simple soap and clean the house with bicarb soda and vinegar. [Studies show] kids born today are born with more chemicals in their blood than adults."

Parent company ONEgroup (an acronym for Organic and Natural Enterprise) now employs 60 staff who work on three distinct labels: Miessence, nutrition range MiVitality and organic household brand MiEnviro.

Chenery is sometimes amazed by the company's growth, given her lack of marketing skills. "I'm a great educator but none of us really has marketing expertise," she says. "We have really grown from the integrity and potency of our products."

AMANDA WATT ►