Background

Cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail technicians are exposed to a range of chemicals while working with personal care products, and have an increased risk of injury and poor health outcomes. These workers may also have low wages, lack employer-sponsored health insurance, or lack coverage under workers’ compensation insurance. Within their industry, consumer protections are emphasized to prevent spread of disease or injuries, but occupational health and safety education for workers is comparatively lacking.

Occupational health and safety training is important to reduce workers’ exposures, but little information is known about their current knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about occupational safety and health. This qualitative study explores the relationship between work and health among one group of occupations—cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail technicians—that has an increased risk of injury and poor health outcomes. The study aims to understand the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about work-related exposures in this population.

Objectives

Primary: To describe the job characteristics, knowledge and attitudes about occupational health and safety, and occupational health concerns among cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail technicians.

Secondary: To identify the survey preferences of this population of workers in preparation for developing a statewide survey.

Methods

Focus Groups

Purposeful and referral sampling methods were used to identify and recruit a convenience sample of cosmetologists, estheticians and nail technicians. Focus groups (n=3) were conducted in-person with study participants at two cosmetology schools and the Minnesota Board of Cosmetology within the Twin Cities metro area. The semi-structured interviews asked participants about their job characteristics, job tasks and services, behaviors and knowledge about occupational safety and protections from hazards, health concerns related to their work, and their survey format preferences.

Participants

Nine people who worked as cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail technicians participated in the focus groups, and ranged from relatively new professionals to salon owners with many years of experience, educators, and salon managers.

Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and reviewed for predetermined and emerging themes.

Results

The following themes emerged from the analysis of focus group interviews with cosmetologists, estheticians and nail technicians:

Job Characteristics

- Complex Job Structures: Types of employment arrangements vary (e.g., full/part time, hourly wage or commission; self-employed, contract employee)
- Supervised by multiple people—usually have no traditional job benefits (e.g., employer-sponsored health insurance, paid time off, retirement benefits, etc.)
- Job tasks include providing services, cleaning tools, and maintaining the salon
- May provide many services or specialize in one area (e.g., hair styling only)

Occupational Exposures and Health Concerns

- Range of Job Tasks and Job Sites: Often provide a range of services, hair styling, hair cutting, hair dyeing or bleaching, hair treatments, facials, hair removal (waxing), aesthetic extensions, nail treatments, and manicures.
- May provide many services or specialize in one area (e.g., hair styling only)
- Job tasks include providing services, cleaning tools, and maintaining the salon
- May have multiple roles (e.g., owner or educator or manager and direct service provider)
- Some professionals work off-site (e.g., event venues) with little control over their work environment

Occupational Safety and Training

- Product Knowledge: Workers were not able to name chemicals in the products they use
- Familiar with brand names

Protections from Hazards

- Use gloves, aprons, masks, or other protective equipment because they believe it interferes with providing services to clients
- Did not use brands or products that would require use of protections
- Primarily worried about their clients having reactions or allergies
- Protocols, such as gloves, were used only for certain tasks (e.g., hair dyeing)
- Believe that some protections (e.g., masks) may provide a false sense of security

Work-Related Health Concerns

- Ergonomic: (e.g., pain/soreness in fingers, wrists, arms, neck, back, legs, or feet)
- Eye strain or irritation from long hours of detailed work, debris from blow dryers, use of asepsis sprays
- Skin irritations (e.g., dry skin, sensitivity in fingertips)
- Migraines
- Chronic stuffy nose
- Sore throat/itching voice
- Mental/social fatigue from interactions with clients
- Anxiety/stress from time demands

Attitudes about Protections

- Do not use gloves, masks or other protective equipment because they believe it interferes with providing services to clients
- Did not use brands or products that would require use of protections
- Primarily worried about their clients having reactions or allergies
- Protocols, such as gloves, were used only for certain tasks (e.g., hair dyeing)
- Believe that some protections (e.g., masks) may provide a false sense of security

- "You know, I’m taller. Bending over the shampoo bowl is horrible for me."
- "I don’t love the idea of the look of it, but it does it. It looks lazy to me."
- "Some clients will try to stylist using a chair or stool to alleviate/prevent ergonomic strain"

Survey Preferences

- Use trusted sources to advertise the survey (e.g., Board of Cosmetology, cosmetology schools)
- Entry into a drawing for gift cards for completing the survey would be a moderate incentive

Conclusion

Cosmetologists, estheticians and nail technicians described working within complex employment structures, and with little access to employer-sponsored benefits.

Workers did not report regularly using personal protective equipment or other methods to prevent chemical exposures from the products they use.

Workers identified several physical and mental stressors—primarily ergonomics and social fatigue, anxiety, and stress—but were less concerned with chemical exposures.

Some respondents indicated that they trusted the products and brands they had been using the chemicals without protections for years without adverse problems.

These professionals reported that they rely substantially on knowledge sharing between peers, and getting occupational health and safety knowledge and training from their school training and continuing education.

These results, and future studies, can inform the development of occupational health and safety trainings for this workforce, including chemical hazard communication activities.

Next Steps

These results will inform the development of a statewide, online survey related to knowledge and attitudes about occupational health and safety. The survey will be emailed to the approximately 32,000 cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail technicians licensed by the Minnesota Board of Cosmetology.

References


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