



American Academy of
Dermatology

Hair and Nail Salons Linked to Infectious Diseases

NEW ORLEANS (March 20, 1999) – A visit to a hair or nail salon usually conjures up images of beauty, pampering and relaxation. But while salons and day spas are known for helping their patrons look good, research suggests that these types of establishments could actually make customers feel sick by transmitting contagious diseases.

Speaking today at the American Academy of Dermatology's 57th Annual Meeting in New Orleans, dermatologist Shelley A. Sekula-Gibbs, MD, Chairman, Legislation Committee, Texas Dermatological Society, discussed potential health risks to hair and nail salon customers and suggested modifying current cosmetology and barbering industry regulations.

Before AIDS and hepatitis became household names, the cosmetology and barbering industry were under little scrutiny as risks for spreading infectious diseases. However, since the 1980s, an epidemic of bloodborne diseases has forced a reexamination of the beauty industry.

Based on her experience in Texas, it is Dr. Sekula's belief that legislators and public health officials need to look seriously at the risks that threaten both clients and operators of the beauty industry. "Poorly trained technicians using dirty instruments are a cause of great concern for consumers," said Dr. Sekula-Gibbs.

The health risks associated with the beauty industry include viral infections such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, and warts; bacterial infections such as staphylococcus, streptococcus, and psuedomonas; fungal infections such as athlete's foot, nail fungus and yeast; reactions to nail, hair and facial products such as hand eczema, eyelid dermatitis, chemical burns, and loss of hair or nails; toxicity from acrylic and lacquer fumes; inappropriate use of chemical peeling solutions; and the delayed diagnosis and treatment of skin cancer and other skin diseases because of failure to refer clients.

Although each of these risks poses considerable health problems for consumers, there are simple ways beauty establishments can modify their current practices and reduce the potential transmission of infectious diseases. Dr. Sekula-Gibbs explained that using disposable instruments whenever possible, properly sterilizing instruments, employing proper hand washing practices, and teaching the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) "universal precautions" in cosmetology and barber schools would virtually eliminate the risks of contracting viral, bacterial and fungal infections.

"Since there is an inherent risk that customers may accidentally be cut during a routine hair or nail appointment, it makes sense to use sterile instruments," said Dr. Sekula-Gibbs. "Nail clippers, acrylic nail drills, cuticle scissors, callus paring blades, reusable razors and blades all have the potential to transmit infectious diseases if they are not properly sterilized. Unfortunately, we are finding that not all salons are following this simple rule of thumb."

In the last 10 years, the CDC published "universal precautions" – or treating everyone's blood, body fluids and tissues as infectious – to help reduce the risk of contracting bloodborne diseases. The universal guidelines require using protective measures with all people, regardless of their infection status. Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) adopted these guidelines for health care workers, EMTs, police officers, funeral workers and other professions in 1991, they left the decision of whether or not to adhere to universal precautions up to the cosmetologist and barber employers. State licensing boards implement safety regulations on a state-by-state basis, but regulations are weak.

"As more and more consumers frequent hair and nail salons each year, the risk of becoming infected with hepatitis, HIV and other transmittable diseases increases as well," said Dr. Sekula-Gibbs. "I believe that states need to take a more proactive stance on this issue by ensuring that workers in the cosmetology and barber industry are educated on the risks of their profession, understand ways to prevent transmitting diseases and receive proper vaccines to safeguard themselves and their clients."

Among the diseases that have the potential to be transmitted at a hair or nail salon, hepatitis B and C pose the biggest threat to public health. There are over 5 million people infected with hepatitis in the U.S. Every year, approximately 100,000 people in the U.S. contract hepatitis B – which is 100 times more contagious than HIV. Between 28,000 and 140,000 people contract hepatitis C. Hepatitis B can be infectious for at least a week on surfaces commonplace to salons such as headrests, chairs, and tools and instruments. There is now evidence that hepatitis C, which prior to 1990 was commonly transmitted through blood transfusions, can be transmitted by razors, nail files and barber's scissors, among other things.

"Salon regulations need to shift from focusing on the aesthetic features of the salon such as the architectural décor and shampoo bowl size to educating the profession on ways to enhance beauty in a safe manner for workers and clients alike," said Dr. Sekula-Gibbs.

The American Academy of Dermatology, founded in 1938, is the largest, most influential, and most representative of all dermatologic associations. With a membership over 11,000 dermatologists worldwide, the Academy is committed to: advancing the science and art of medicine and surgery related to the skin; advocating high standards in clinical practice, education, and research in dermatology; supporting and enhancing patient care; and promoting a lifetime of healthier skin, hair, and nails. For more information, contact the AAD at 1-888-462-DERM.