

**Focus Group Results: How training and employment conditions impact on
Toronto nail technicians' ability to protect themselves at work.**

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"I want to protect myself at work, because I like this job, so I want to do it and protect myself" (Participant 4)

Background

Nail salon workers in Toronto are typically female immigrants from either China or Vietnam. They work in a profession where throughout the workday they are regularly exposed to chemicals known to cause cancer, respiratory illnesses and reproductive problems (Quach et al., 2013). As immigrants, issues such as gender, language, income, and immigration status create increased vulnerabilities. Looking at the environmental health of nail salon workers is critical as it is an area that has not been highly investigated, especially in Canada. When researching nail salon workers in the United States, it was found that salon workers are exposed to volatile solvents like toluene and phthalates but with lagging regulatory standards (Quatch et al., 2012) Workers suffer from a variety of respiratory, skin and muscular-skeletal problem that they attribute to their chemical exposures and working conditions (Roelofs et al., 2008, Quach et al., 2011). An article in the Globe and Mail found that women working in nail salons in Toronto did not want to be interviewed about their health for fear of repercussions around immigration status or from their bosses (Balkissoon, 2012). This highlights both the vulnerabilities of this group and the importance of adding the voices and experiences of Toronto nail technicians to the work and research that is being done.

Methods

Central Toronto Community Health Centres was well positioned to do this research as they have a strong connection to the Chinese community through their programs,

and Chinese speaking staff. Although there are other immigrant groups who work in the nail salon industry, in particular Vietnamese immigrants, the community health centre focussed on Chinese immigrants, as they are a priority population being served at the centre. Firstly, three peer facilitators who either spoke Chinese or had experience as nail salon workers were hired to assist in recruitment, program planning and delivery. The outreach workers then recruited nail technicians through a combination of salon-to-salon outreach, snowball method, and convenience sampling. The sample was made up entirely of female Chinese immigrants who were currently working as nail technicians and one owner/nail technician. A focus group with nail technicians (N=7) was then conducted on May 26, 2014 to ascertain what barriers they face in mitigating their exposures. An interpreter was used to help translate the questions into Chinese for all participants and translate the answers back to English for focus group participants who felt more comfortable answering in Chinese. The questions focussed primarily on two social determinants of health, education-in the form of training, and employment conditions.

Training

For the most part nail technicians in Toronto who immigrated from China learned how to do nails on the job. Some practiced or learned in China before coming to Canada but all of them had to learn certain aspects in Canada as doing nails in China and Canada is different.

"I learned in China in one month that skills (doing nails)... and I know a friend she do the nails, she tell me it's different here and she teach me what's the difference between in China and here." (Participant 1)

After arriving in Canada the women found nail salons either online or through friends and approached the owners to find out if they could work there. In Toronto, most Chinese nail technicians train for one month at the salon and pay the salon for their month of training. After the training is complete they then begin to get paid. The owner and fellow nail technicians train new nail technicians on the job, who assume more junior level tasks in the beginning.

Permanent vs. Short Term Workers and Training

Through the focus group we found that there were two distinct groups of nail technicians. There were those who saw their work as a nail technician as a long-term career and those who used the flexible hours of nail salon work as a way to earn money while doing other things, like pursuing education or child-raising. Focus group participants estimated that half of nail salon workers fell into the category of permanent career and the other half were doing it short term until they were done school or found something else. Those who saw their work as nail technicians as long term employment were more likely to take a formal course or courses after their on the job training.

"I actually I know how to do the nail when I was in China... But is very unprofessional... and when I came to Canada, I found a nail salon, I go inside and I said "I can do the nail", and the owner give me a polish and said, "ok, do my nails" and I was shaking do(ing) her nail. And after that and she said, "oh it's the same as if you do your nails at home". And so I pay the money to learn how to do the nail properly and be professional. But I think that is not enough, so last year I take the course to, I mean

registered nail technician teacher, to learn how to do nails professional(ly) and how to protect ourselves and even, also protect the customers."
(Participant 2)

Education around protection from chemicals

Because most of the workers were taught the job by the owners of the nail salon, their knowledge of how to protect themselves initially depended entirely on the owners. With only one exception this meant that the workers were not taught about any of the risks of exposures or any steps that they could take to protect themselves.

"I know it is very bad for the body but we work here, nobody tell us how to protect oursel(ves) " (Participant 2)

Focus group participants were surprised and impressed by one participant who related how the owner of her salon took chemical exposures very seriously.

" When I came here, I work here for my boss, he is very care about this part, everybody should wear gloves and the mask, that's the rule, you have to do it, ... and special acrylic, every time we do we have to open the door because (the acrylic) very smells, and we have to (open the door), no matter the air conditioning or everything we have to open the door and if the customer not there we open the door and let the fresh air get inside. " (Participant 1)

For the most part nail technician expressed that they knew that the chemicals they worked with could cause health problems but they encountered barriers to learning about how to protect themselves. When asked where they would get information from, many responded that they would look on line or ask friends, one even mentioned the doctor but then was unsure that a male doctor would have a good understanding.

A few also expressed a fear that by asking other nail technicians-especially those who weren't having any health issues they might be perceived as judging or worrying too much. One nail technician also revealed another barrier to learning, stating that *"I'm too scared to ask because... they (might) say something bad back to me, you know"* (Participant 3). This sentiment reveals a tension for salon workers, who worry that too much knowledge might make them feel they need to leave their job on which they depend on for their salary. The only nail technicians who felt any degree of confidence around their knowledge of how to protect themselves were those who had followed up on their on the job training with formal courses in Toronto and the one whose owner was careful with his practices.

Current health protection practices

With the exception of the one nail technician who worked for an owner that cared about chemical exposures, the other nail technicians tended to have very few practices and workplace policies in place. Most were familiar with hand washing frequently, most did not regularly wear gloves and the gloves that were available were latex not nitrile. Surgical masks were available but only used when filing acrylic nails and N-95 or respirator masks were not being used. Ventilation systems were sometimes being used, such as vented tables or air filters, but the cost was seen as a barrier. One salon paid attention to keeping doors and windows open for ventilation. Workplace practices like keeping lids closed and throwing out trash were common. Workers noted that other workers could also affect the air by

forgetting to put the lids back on containers. Nail technicians reported having very little say over which products are used so could not influence source reduction.

"But we cannot make the decision to buy which chemical, I mean which product."
(Participant 2)

In an interesting flip side to this, nail technicians were also interested in trying to find areas where they could exert some degree of control over their health. In the salon they have a very limited locus of control but nail technician brought up that they have air filters at home that they use to keep their home air clean, and they also mentioned taking vitamins and antioxidants as a way to stay healthier. Lastly they also brought up reducing their work hours as a way of protecting their health. Even with these practices, the technicians brought up the tension they feel about working in a place where they know the chemicals could harm them.

"Nothing for me (when asked about possible future paths for work). I can't change my job. I can't quit the beauty career. I really like it. I don't know what can I do? Actually so many time(s) I ask myself, what can I do? Finally, I still like this job. Maybe just do the part time job to protect myself and maybe focus to other part (that are) still the beauty career." (Participant 2)

Health Effects and Concerns

Participants in the focus group named a variety of health effects that they suffered. These health conditions included skin problems and irritations, allergies, upset stomachs, problems sleeping, tiredness, musculoskeletal issues, burning eyes and

coughing. They also brought up concerns they had around pregnancy and chemical exposures.

"She's considering about getting pregnant. So, for preparation for her pregnancy is it to have a certain period of time not working in a nail salon, or having some of the protection like vitamins and masks or something like that is sufficient to have a healthy baby? (Translated-Participant 4)

They also noted side effects of certain products, stating that certain colours of nail polish had a stronger effect on them than others and that the product used to remove callouses was very strong and if it falls on their skin it burns and removes part of their skin.

Customers and Protection

Because the relationship between nail technician and customer is so important, the customers perspectives and desires impact nail technician health. For example one nail technician remarked that it is difficult to wear a mask because she already struggles with her English and it makes communication with the customer more difficult. Most nail technicians at the focus group agreed that customers do not care about the health impacts of the products they are using they simply want nice nails at a good price.

"They (the customers) only care about the price. And sometimes we suggest use the bio-gel but they say, "no, is too expensive, use acrylic". (Participant 1)

On the other hand, one participant expressed concern that increased media attention around toxics and the health impacts of nail salon products were affecting

customer demand and fewer people were coming to salons. Even though most focus group participants disagreed with this notion, it speaks to the vulnerabilities of the workers who realize that should customers decide that nail salons aren't healthy places to go, they would effectively lose their livelihood.

Owners and Protection

Nail technician in the focus group expressed they felt that owners were not providing better protection for workers for a number of reasons. The issue of cost came up a number of times, like when owners do not provide gloves but have no issues with workers bringing their own. Sometimes the salon workers were understanding of the predicaments of the owners, such as the one who tried to buy an air purifier for the store but found that the filters each cost about 200-300 dollars and so could not afford to keep it up. Nail technicians also noted that many of the owners didn't know themselves about protection and so it was only out of ignorance that they didn't teach them their workers how to protect themselves.

Conclusion

Nail technicians at the focus group viewed the issue of protecting themselves at work as important. Those who were planning to stay in it for the long term liked the job and wanted to find ways to be safe and healthy doing it. Some of those who were in it for the long term expected to one day open their own salon.

"I'm going to run the business I think. I want to get more information about the health and how to protect for me and the people working in the nail salon and the customer"
(Participant 5)

In conclusion the results helped confirm some of what we had heard anecdotally from settlement workers and also revealed new information about current training and employment conditions of Chinese nail technicians in Toronto. This information helped the community health centre with its program planning and development in setting up appropriate workshops for nail technicians focusing on protecting hands at work (including proper glove use), the employment standards act in Ontario, an overview of chemical exposures and harm, reproductive health and nail salon work .

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