

New Discoveries about Difficulties for Vietnamese Manicurists
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When Tran Bui opened her very own nail salon four months ago, she couldn't have been more proud. She had taken care to make the salon as neat and cheerful as possible. There were lots of plants and fresh paint on the walls, and she was starting to get loyal customers who appreciated her attention to their nails and her bright salon. But something was bothering her. Her customers didn't complain, but she thought that the chemicals in the air in the salon gave her headaches everyday. The girl she hired to work with her on Saturdays didn't complain either, but at the end of the day, her neck and back bothered her. And then Tran was starting to get itchy red patches on her face. Was it something she ate or something in the salon? Was it the mask she wore to protect herself from the chemicals? Tran wondered if other nail salon techs had the same problems and what could be done about them.....

Tran Bui is the fictional owner of a nail salon in the Greater Boston area. But her concerns are real and she is not alone. A new study conducted by the Dorchester-based Vietnamese American Initiative for Development, Inc (Viet-AID) and researchers at the University of Massachusetts Lowell has found that many nail techs in the Boston area report work-related health problems, such as headaches, skin problems and muscle aches and pains. Many work long hours, too. The average hours worked per week by the 71 nail techs surveyed was 46, with some working as many as 80 hours per week. Working so many hours, it is not surprising that the work can take a toll. And some of the chemicals in the nail products can cause skin and breathing problems if people are exposed to them for long periods of time.

Almost one-third of the nail techs who were interviewed for the survey reported at least one respiratory symptom that got better when they were away from work for a period of time – an indication that work in the nail salon can cause such things as irritation in the nose and throat and difficulty breathing. Fortunately, not many nail techs reported having asthma, even though the nail liquid chemical used to make fake nails has been recognized by occupational health doctors to cause “sensitization” that can lead to asthma. Skin problems were also commonly reported with more than 30% of the surveyed nail techs saying that they had itches or redness on their hands or face. That strong smelling liquid can also cause skin problems, but other chemicals that dry the skin such as alcohol or acetone might also contribute. Even the frequent hand washing required in a salon can lead to skin problems.

The nail tech's most common complaint was muscle aches and pains. Holding the nail filing machine, working with a bend neck and back, and even giving massages were some of the things that caused problems for the 46% of nail techs who said they experienced pain or numbness. Almost as many reported work-related headaches and 28% said that they thought that work affected their concentration or made them feel faint.

Some of the reason for these complaints may be a lack of fresh air in salons. Almost a third of the respondents said that there is no fresh air brought in and twenty percent

thought that there wasn't enough fresh air in their salons. Many were bothered by the odors at work (63%), but others said that they were used to it.

Not many salon workers had been told or knew about the potential hazards of the chemicals that they worked with, but others had been given advice by their employer. One said "The owner says that the chemicals are harmful, so we should always keep the ventilator on and close the lids and covers of the chemicals." Others had been told to wear masks or chose to wear them themselves. In fact, almost all of the nail techs said that they wore masks – some to "keep hygiene" and others to protect their health. As one woman said "I'm young and pregnant and I don't want to breathe in the dust and chemicals. I'm afraid it may affect my child later on."

What about those masks? Our fictional salon owner, Tran Bui wondered if they were helping or hurting. They may be hurting. The paper or cloth hygiene masks worn by nail techs do not protect them from breathing in chemicals. Chemicals in the air are so small that they can go right through the mask. The masks may help prevent nail techs from breathing in dust, but they may also collect dust and chemicals that can irritate the skin of the face.

What can Tran Bui and others do to prevent the work they love (or the good living it provides) from hurting their bodies? There are many commonsense solutions. The first is to keep the chemicals from getting in the air by keeping all containers closed when possible. (You also want to keep the chemicals from getting on your skin and wearing protective gloves can help.) The second is to get fresh air into the salon by keeping doors and windows open or turning on ventilation systems and air conditioners. Air cleaners and ceiling exhaust fans will not be effective in removing chemicals from the air. Ventilation systems that bring in fresh cool or warm air at all times of the year are the best way to keep the air moving. Aches and pains are harder to prevent if you work long hours in awkward positions, but taking mini-breaks between customers, using padded wrist rests and gently stretching the back and neck may help.

One month after Tran Bui had called Viet-AID to get some advice about improving her health at work, she felt that their suggestions had already made an improvement. She had thrown away the "Steri-Dry" containers that contained an irritating chemical and weren't necessary anyway. She only wore the mask when filing with the machine and she turned on her air system more. Everyone in the salon took little breaks to stretch and rest between customers and started wearing gloves to transfer the nail products from the big to the little containers they used at their stations. One of her new customers told her that she started coming to Tran because her usual salon smelled too strong. The staff at Viet-AID had also helped her get a loan to buy a new pedicure chair and it was drawing new customers. As well as feeling better herself, Tran started to feel that protecting her and her employees' health was good business.

For more information about this survey and advice about health and work in a nail salon, you can call Viet-AID at (617) 822-3717 or email health@vietaid.org.