



Hearing focuses on health, safety of nail salon workers

Roughly 80 percent in California are Vietnamese

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SAN FRANCISCO — Lam Thi Le, 58, recalls experiencing dizziness, skin rashes and headaches on a daily basis.

She believes it was from working in a nail salon.

Nail salon workers use products containing toxic ingredients such as formaldehyde, toluene and phthalates — chemicals linked to host of illnesses, including cancer, or respiratory or reproductive problems.

Le is one of several workers who testified Thursday before a state senate hearing at San Francisco City Hall on the safety and health of nail salon workers.

"With my limited English, I accepted the job as a manicurist, even though I have suffered a lot of bad health symptoms as a result of this work," Le said in Vietnamese. An estimated 80 percent of nail salon workers and owners in California are Vietnamese. Most of them are low-income women of child-bearing age who do not have health care, according to statistics provided at the hearing.

Le, an Oakland resident who came to the United States in 1988, said she had very few employment options, other than working in a factory.

Working in salons for 12 years has taken a toll on her health.

In 2002, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which has since returned. She has also experienced lung problems and asthma.

She said through a translator that she does not know if working with toxic ingredients caused the cancer.

But research has shown that ingredients nail salon workers use include carcinogens and chemicals that may lead to birth defects.

State Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, who convened the hearing, recounted visits to salons and seeing workers wearing masks.

"We know just by the nature of the experience that something seems unsafe," said Migden, who chairs the Senate Committee on Labor and Industrial Relations.

She said the hearing, organized with the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, was intended to "shine a spotlight" on worker safety and conditions.

The nail industry is growing. The number of licensed nail salon technicians tripled in the last two decades to 300,000 — a number that includes manicurists and cosmetologists, who are licensed to cut hair, give facials and do nails.

Salons are popping up everywhere, and competition has driven the prices down so low that people can get weekly manicures and pedicures.

And younger girls are getting into the mix.

Judi Shiels, who testified Thursday, said getting nails done is a rite of passage for many moms and

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daughters.

Shils said she began taking her daughter to salons when the girl was 10; when they'd leave, Shils would feel sick.

Since then, Shils has started Teens for Safe Cosmetics, based in Marin.

"We have to start making products that you don't have to question," she said.

And while consumers and clients may feel the short term effects of the toxic soup, workers face these toxins for hours each day.

Le said she worked 10 hours a day, six or seven days a week during her

12-year salon career.

Many immigrants may be surprised to learn the products they work with — nail polish, for example — contain toxic ingredients since they are sold legally.

Connie Nguyen, who worked as a cosmetologist for 13 years, said she has suffered from skin rashes and asthma.

But when she talked to her co-workers and salon owners about it, they said that products sold in the U.S. must be safe.

Migden's California Safe Cosmetics Act of 2005 attempts to chip away at the issue. The law, which went into effect in January, requires manufacturers to report any known toxins in their products. Advocates hope this will encourage companies to reformulate their products to use safer ingredients.

But even something as simple as reporting ingredients may be tricky.

That's because some ingredients may be hidden under "fragrances" in the ingredient list.

That can include up to 200 different ingredients, said Janet Nudelman of the Breast Cancer Fund. In addition, companies buy fragrances from fragrance-makers and may not even know what's in them.

Regulatory oversight of the industry is also lacking.

For example, the federal Food and Drug Administration does not regulate cosmetics and doesn't require that all ingredients be tested before they're sold, according to testimony at the hearing. The cosmetics industry regulates itself.

Of the 10,000 chemicals the industry uses, about 90 percent have never been tested for safety, according to the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

Of the 40,000 salon establishments in the state, California Department of Occupational Safety and Health has inspected 45 of them in the last five years — and only nine were specifically nail salons. Others were barber shops, beauty salons and cosmetology schools, according to information Cal/OSHA provided at the hearing.

The California Air Resources Board focuses on outdoor air quality; and the Board of Barbering and Cosmetology, the professional licensing board, has 16 only inspectors for the state, and its main focus is consumer safety.

Nhung Pham, a nail salon worker from Oakland, said that when salons or individuals are given citations or new rules to comply with, the material is always in English.

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"Regulations and information on chemicals are constantly changing, but rarely do workers like me receive information about it," she testified.

These chemicals may have cumulative effects.

Is that what happened to Le, whose breast cancer returned after a few years in remission?

She doesn't know.

When asked how she feels today, she said she is not angry.

But she just wants to know if the cancer was caused by working in the salons.

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