**Perfect Nails, Poisoned Workers**

The New York Times

By Sarah Maslin Nir

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Each time a customer pulled open the glass door at the nail shop in Ridgewood, Queens, where Nancy Otavalo worked, a cheerful chorus would ring out from where she sat with her fellow manicurists against the wall: “Pick a color!”

Ms. Otavalo, a 39-year-old Ecuadorean immigrant, was usually stationed at the first table. She trimmed and buffed and chatted about her quick-witted toddler, or her strapping 9-year-old boy. But she never spoke of another dreamed-for child, the one lost last year in a miscarriage that began while she was giving a customer a shoulder massage.

At the second table was Monica A. Rocano, 30, who sometimes brought a daughter to visit. But clients had never met her 3-year-old son, Matthew Ramon. People thought Matthew was shy, but in fact he has barely learned how to speak and can walk only with great difficulty.

A chair down from Ms. Rocano was another, quieter manicurist. In her idle moments, she surfed the Internet on her phone, seeking something that might explain the miscarriage she had last year. Or the four others that came before.

Similar stories of illness and tragedy abound *(exist in large numbers)* at nail salons across the country, of children born slow or “special,” of miscarriages and cancers, of coughs that will not go away and painful skin afflictions. The stories have become so common that older manicurists warn women of child-bearing age away from the business, with its potent *(strong)* brew of polishes, solvents, hardeners and glues that nail workers handle daily.

A growing body of medical research shows a link between the chemicals that make nail and beauty products useful — the ingredients that make them chip-resistant and pliable, quick to dry and brightly colored, for example — and serious health problems.

1. What are some of the negative health effects nail salon workers might experience?

Whatever the threat the typical customer enjoying her weekly French tips might face, it is a different order of magnitude, advocates say, for manicurists who handle the chemicals and breathe their fumes for hours on end, day after day.

The prevalence of respiratory and skin ailments among nail salon workers is widely acknowledged. More uncertain, however, is their risk for direr *(having dreadful consequences)* medical issues. Some of the chemicals in nail products are known to cause cancer; others have been linked to abnormal fetal development, miscarriages and other harm to reproductive health.

But firm conclusions are elusive *(difficult to find)*, partly because the research is so limited. Very few studies have focused on nail salon workers specifically. Little is known about the true extent to which they are exposed to hazardous chemicals, what the accumulated effect is over time and whether a connection can actually be drawn to their health.

The federal law that regulates cosmetics safety, which is more than 75 years old, does not require companies to share safety information with the Food and Drug Administration. The law bans ingredients harmful to users, but it contains no provisions for the agency to evaluate the effects of the chemicals before they are put on shelves. Industry lobbyists have fought tougher monitoring requirements.

2) Is federal law strictly regulating cosmetics safety? Why or why not?

Industry officials say their products contain minuscule *(very small)* amounts of the chemicals identified as potentially hazardous and pose no threat.’

“What I hear are insinuations based on ‘linked to,’” said Doug Schoon, co-chairman of the Professional Beauty Association’s Nail Manufacturers Council on Safety. “When we talk about nail polish, there’s no evidence of harm.”

Health advocates and officials disagree, pointing to the accumulated evidence.

“We know that a lot of the chemicals are very dangerous,” said David Michaels, the assistant labor secretary who heads the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which oversees workplace safety. “We don’t need to see the effect in nail salon workers to know that they are dangerous to the workers.”

Some states and municipalities recommend workers wear gloves and other protection, but salon owners usually discourage them from donning *(putting on)* such unsightly gear. And even though officials overseeing workplace safety concede *(admit)* that federal standards on levels of chemicals that these workers can be exposed to need revision, nothing has been done.

3) Why do you think there’s a discrepancy *(difference)* between what industry officials and health advocates believe in terms of the toxicity of nail products?

**‘They Cannot Breathe’**

The walls of Dr. Charles Hwu’s second-story office in Flushing, Queens, are decorated with Chinese calligraphy, gifts from patients he has cared for from cradle to adulthood. Over his decades as an internist in this predominantly Asian enclave, Dr. Hwu has repeatedly encountered a particular set of conditions affecting otherwise healthy women.

In interviews with over 125 nail salon workers, airway ailments like those in Dr. Hwu’s office were ubiquitous. Many have learned to simply laugh them off — the nose that constantly bleeds, the throat that has ached every day since the manicurist started working.

Skin disorders are also omnipresent among nail salon workers. Many of the chemicals in nail salon products are classified by government agencies as skin sensitizers, capable of provoking painful reactions.

When Ki Ok Chung, a manicurist who worked in salons for almost two decades, had her fingerprints taken in the early 2000s for her United States citizenship, she made an upsetting discovery: Her prints were almost nonexistent. They had to be taken seven times. She says constant work with files, solvents and emollients is responsible.

“It’s a beautiful industry, it makes people feel better,” Ms. Colon, who owned the salon in Mill Basin, said in an interview, a faint wheeze just audible behind her ready laugh. “But if a lot of people knew the truth behind it, it wouldn’t happen. They wouldn’t go.”

4) Do you agree with Ms. Colon’s statement? Why or why not?

The regulation of chemicals in nail products is dictated by the [Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act](http://www.fda.gov/regulatoryinformation/legislation/federalfooddrugandcosmeticactfdcact/) of 1938. The part of the law that deals with cosmetics totals just 591 words.

The Food and Drug Administration [explains the limitations](http://www.fda.gov/Cosmetics/GuidanceRegulation/LawsRegulations/ucm074162.htm) it faces under the law on its website: “Cosmetic products and ingredients do not need F.D.A. premarket approval, with the exception of color additives.” It continues, “Neither the law nor F.D.A. regulations require specific tests to demonstrate the safety of individual products or ingredients.” In addition, “The law also does not require cosmetic companies to share their safety information with F.D.A.”

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is the federal agency that sets chemical exposure limits in workplaces. The studies that have examined the chemical exposure levels for manicurists have found them to be well below these standards. Health advocates say the safety administration’s standards are badly out of date and flawed.

Even Dr. Michaels, the head of the safety administration, said his agency’s standards needed revision. Currently, he said, workers “can be exposed to levels that are legal according to OSHA but are still dangerous.”

5) How is the FDA’s Cosmetic Act an example of the “innocent until proven guilty” theory?

***Cuomo Orders Emergency Measures to Protect Workers at Nail Salons***

**The New York Times**

**By** [**SARAH MASLIN NIR**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/sarah_maslin_nir/index.html)

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Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/andrew_m_cuomo/index.html?inline=nyt-per) ordered emergency measures on Sunday to combat the wage theft and health hazards faced by the thousands of people who work in New York State’s nail salon industry.

Effective immediately, he said in a statement, a new, multiagency task force will conduct salon-by-salon investigations, institute new rules that salons must follow to protect manicurists from the potentially dangerous chemicals found in nail products, and begin a six-language education campaign to inform them of their rights.

Under new rules, manicurists must wear gloves to reduce the risks of contracting skin conditions, such as fungal infections and warts, and developing burns from handling chemicals.

The plan currently will also require masks, though occupational health experts say the hospital-style masks that manicurists sometimes wear give only the appearance of safety. Such masks do almost nothing to prevent exposure to chemicals, such as dibutyl phthalate, toluene and formaldehyde, that are used in nail products and have been linked to leukemia and fetal defects. And salons will be required to be ventilated, to reduce the chemical fumes.

6) Do you believe that the actions New York State is taking to reduce nail workers’ exposure to toxic chemicals is enough? Why or why not?

**Justice for Nail Salon Workers**

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Across the country, countless workers in the nail salon industry, mainly immigrant women, toil in misery and ill health for meager *(low)* pay, usually with no overtime, abused by employers who show little or no consideration for their safety and well-being. It is a world of long days and toxic chemicals, where the usual protections of government have failed, at all levels.

This is where the federal government must help. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration needs better outreach and services to protect women who suffer from exposure to toxic salon chemicals. These problems are not going to be solved by lunchroom safety posters, but by stricter standards and enforcement.

This is where government must build upon many years of work by grass-roots labor organizations. One example is the [New York Healthy Nail Salons Coalition,](http://nycosh.org/2015/05/ny-healthy-nail-salons-coalition-praises-cuomos-initiative-highlights-need-for-additional-inspectors-and-public-health-education/) led by the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, and Adhikaar, which means “rights” in Nepali. Adhikaar, based in Queens, has been giving Nepali nail salon workers health and safety training and encouraging the creation of “green” salons using nontoxic products.

7) How can the government work to protect the health of nail salon workers?

8) Who should be blamed for unsafe working conditions in nail salons: the nail industry, the federal government, the salons or the clients? Why?

Write three questions that can be used to generate discussion during the Socratic seminar:

1)

2)

3)