

How Could Anyone Work in a Nail Salon?

Shôn Ellerton, January 4, 2023

It seems surprising to me how workers could be allowed, or even want to work in the environment of a nail salon.



Anyone visiting a shopping mall will, no doubt, have walked by a nail salon at some time or another. During the last couple of years, it seems that they have been burgeoning at a prolific rate, with some malls boasting at least three or four of them, all within a short distance of each other.

I walk past the window of one and take a glance. A young woman with big 80s style hair sporting massive nails coated with sparkly metallic glitter. A menacing looking goth-type with scary-looking black nails. A couple of older ladies in a corner getting their toenails done. All being served by mainly young Asian women wearing masks. There are some who are not wearing masks at all.

What I found most astonishing of all was the smell emanating from these shops. Having a nose which is more sensitive than most, I can detect a nail salon shop well before spotting it in one of these indoor malls. Standing well *outside* within the corridor of the mall, the odour blast emanating from these salons is unmistakable, but standing near the entrance, it is almost unbearable.

Why do I bring this up?

It so happens, that I was recently repainting the interior doors and architraves at home with oil-based paint. After a sustained period, I become noticeably affected and felt somewhat woozy. At various times in the past, I tried painting with a mask, but that didn't seem to make an iota of difference. If anything, it made matters worse by deadening the movement of air in the space I was working in.

Professional paint sprayers have rooms kitted out with proper extraction fans and they wear special respirator masks designed to filter out harmful vapours from enamel-based paint. No way that those ordinary masks worn by nail salon staff will filter out harmful vapours, but I guess the clientele would look freaked out if they wore those bulky-looking respirator masks.

Australia, with some of the strictest health and safety policies in the world, I'm somewhat surprised how it is allowed for workers in a nail salon to be exposed at length with these harmful vapours. Maybe nobody's raised the issue before, although, I'm sure somebody had done so. Perhaps there's no research to suggest that working in a nail salon is potentially harmful to health. Which is interesting, considering that many of the products including glues, polishes, removers, emollients and varnishes contain a concoction of rather nasty chemicals. Such chemicals include acetone, toluene, formaldehyde, dibutyl phthalate and methacrylate compounds according to the [Occupation Safety and Health Administration](#), part of the United States Department of Labour.

Of course, nobody is forced to work at a nail salon, and, therein, lies the problem. Cheap and, often desperate, labour for those struggling to make a living while manicuring the nails of the more affluent classes to make them look better. This is not exclusive, by any means, to the nail salon industry. Fast food workers earning a pittance feeding the already-large bellies of regular fast food customers, to give an example.

It can take time for awareness of something potentially dangerous to kick in. In 2020, new research was revealed that cutting engineered stone, for kitchen counters, is a major hazard to the respiratory system, as asbestos is. Going way back to the 60s, there were shoe shops with free-to-use feet X-ray machines to scan your feet still in shoes so that one can see the foot, and all its bones, within the outline of the shoe. They were called [shoe-fitting fluoroscopes](#). They were rather sinister-looking contraptions with its wooden box housing periscope-like viewfinders, dials and gauges. They looked like some bit of kit out of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and, astonishingly, many shoe shops had them. An interesting novelty of the time, but my mother was reprimanded for using it by her father, a physicist whose expertise was in the field of X-rays. Predictably, they were removed as quickly as they were introduced once awareness of the dangers of using them came to be.

Walking away from the entrance of the nail salon to get some fresh air, the smell still lingers in my nose. I wonder if those working in a nail salon suffer any health issues like those who used to spray paint with masks on. I was scratching my brain if there was an industry involving the use of solvents with such lax rules in place. I couldn't think of any.