

Study: Hairstylists can help identify older clients who need health services

September 8 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

Hairstylists may have a unique opportunity to help steer their elderly clients to needed health services, according to a small, exploratory study.

More than 80 percent of 40 Columbus-area stylists surveyed said that older clients often or always shared their problems during appointments.

"Hair stylists are in a great position to notice when their older clients are starting to suffer from depression, dementia, or self-neglect," said Keith Anderson, co-author of the study and assistant professor of social work at Ohio State University.

"While not expecting too much beyond the scope of their jobs, we may be able to help stylists direct elderly people in trouble to community services."

Anderson conducted the study with Andrea Cimbale and Jeffrey Maile, graduate students in [social work](#) at Ohio State. Their results appear in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Gerontology*.

Anderson said he decided to do the study after reading sometimes-joking references in the popular press to "salon therapy," in which clients discussed their relationship, family and health problems to their stylists, who act as sympathetic ears and sometimes as pseudo-therapists.

"I wondered if stylists really did have these close relationships with their clients," Anderson said.

"And if they did, I thought there might be opportunities to use these relationships to help older adults."

Anderson focused on older adults in this study because of his research interest in gerontology.

The study included 40 stylists from the Columbus area who responded to a mail survey. The participants reported that, on average, about one-third of their clients were 60 years old or older.

Anderson said the results suggest that most stylists do develop close long-term relationships with their older clients.

About 85 percent of stylists described their relationships with older clients as "close" or "very close." About 72 percent said their role was like one of "family" to some of their older customers.

"This is one reason why I think hair stylists are especially suited to seeing problems in their customers," Anderson said.

"Their older clients may sit in a chair for an hour or longer while they're having their hair done, and this may happen once or twice a month. So stylists are in a good position to recognize when things change with a client, and when they may need help."

Health and family problems are the issues most often brought up by elderly customers - more than three-quarters of stylists have heard such complaints, the survey revealed. And more than a third of stylists said clients have discussed problems with depression or anxiety.

The vast majority of stylists said their response to hearing their clients' problems is to offer sympathy and support, and to try to cheer them up.

But fewer than half said they have given advice, and only about one-quarter have tried to get the client to speak to someone who can help them.

That's not because they are not willing to help, Anderson said. About two-thirds said they are willing to refer an older client to appropriate services.

But the problem, Anderson said, is that more than half - 52 percent -- said they were not familiar with community services that may be helpful to older adults.

"It seems like a perfect setup - stylists have access to older adults who may need someone to point them to the help they need. But at least this sample of stylists suggests they don't know what services are out there to help these folks," he said.

But could hairstylists identify older clients who needed professional help?

At least the stylists surveyed thought they could. The researchers asked participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest) their ability to recognize symptoms of depression, [dementia](#) and neglect in their older clients. In all three cases, stylists rated their ability between 7.6 and 7.8.

Anderson said the question then becomes how to get stylists more involved in helping their older clients. He noted that there's already a national domestic violence awareness program called "Cut It Out" that recruits hair stylists to recognize indicators of domestic violence and get victims help. Something similar could be done to assist older adults with mental health and related problems.

Anderson said he recognizes that stylists have a job to do, and can't devote too much of their time and education to issues unrelated to hair styling.

Only 45 percent of the stylists surveyed said they were interested in receiving mental health training.

But stylists could play an important role by even just learning about local community services and offering brochures to older adults that have information on how to access the help they need.

"We can't expect them to do everything, but our results suggest that most stylists care about their clients and would be willing to help them," he said.

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Study: Hairstylists can help identify older clients who need health services (2009, September 8) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-hairstylists-older-clients-health.html>

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