Is Beauty Parlor Stroke Syndrome a Real Thing?

By ACSH Staff — March 10, 2016

A 48-year old California woman experienced a life-threatening blood clot and subsequent stroke over two years ago, and a routine salon hair wash [3] was blamed. She continues to suffer from a loss of balance and vision problems, not to mention perpetual worry that the clot that formed could shift at any moment causing further cerebral damage.

This was caused by what some neurologists call “beauty parlor stroke syndrome [4].”

When Elizabeth Williams visited San Diego’s Blowbunny: Blow Dry & Hair Extensions Bar in 2013 for a hair cut, her lawsuit claims, as her head hung back in the washbasin her cervical vertebrae allegedly sliced an artery in her hyper-extended neck.

Two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars in medical bills later, she is suing the salon for negligence. “We believe the personnel didn’t adequately support her neck or adjust the chair properly to compensate for the small frame of our client,” attorney Spencer Busby said in an interview with KGT [5]. The suit also claim’s the salon’s chair and sink were defective, thereby inducing further stress on the plaintiff’s neck.

But was it just bad luck or is beauty parlor stroke syndrome a real thing, and how common is it? Unfortunately isolated cases studies are all we have and those are great for lawsuits but not so for science and health data. A 2006 case study in Cerebrovascular Diseases [6] reported a 63-year old woman who experienced sudden dizziness, nausea and started vomiting after placing her head backwards into a salon sink. These symptoms, combined with neck pain, persisted for two days before doctors found an acute arterial dissection near the cervical spine and diagnosed her with the disorder. In 1993, the Journal of the American Medical Association [7] highlighted five separate diagnoses where elderly folks reported similar symptoms as a result of the sustained neck posture salon shampooing necessitates.

So, the answer is...it could be that it is just a case where we desire to create medical terminology...
for everything. If this exists, it is pretty rare. Rest assured that there is no need to go canceling your next foil session.

Still, the case studies at least point to some common factors, and they are common to multiple conditions; age, presence of atherosclerosis and a sensitive arterial lining. It should also be noted that beauty parlor stroke syndrome is not relegated to just the salon. Rather, it has more to do with activities that require over-extending the neck or excessively looking upwards for long(ish) periods of time.