

Hair Care Professionals as Community Health Partners in Detection and Management of Alopecia: A Pilot Survey Study

Lisa Akintilo MD MPH,^a Rachel Sally BA,^b Katharina Shaw MD,^a Nkemjika Ugonabo MD MPH,^a Jerry Shapiro MD,^a Kristen Lo Sicco MD^a

^aThe Ronald O. Perelman Department of Dermatology, New York University Grossman School of Medicine, New York, NY

^bNew York University Grossman School of Medicine, New York, NY

ABSTRACT

Background: Alopecia is one of the most common diagnoses encountered by dermatologists; despite this, patients with hair loss often seek help from hair stylists prior to seeing a physician.

Objective: The purpose of this pilot survey study was to investigate hair stylists as hair loss community health partners and identify how dermatologists can potentially play a key role in cosmetology education.

Study-Design: Twenty-four New York City hair stylists completed a novel 23-item survey via email.

Results: When encountering hair loss in clients, stylists not formally educated about alopecia reported initially recommending their clients see a dermatologist, while those who were taught on the subject reported first recommending over the counter products as treatment. Hair stylists with alopecia training were equally as likely as those without alopecia training to believe hair styling practices do not contribute to hair loss.

Conclusion: Our data support the need for integrated dermatologic training in cosmetology schools, particularly in the area of hair loss, with combined support of established hair instructors and dermatologists. Developing a brief curriculum regarding the fundamentals of alopecia etiology, diagnostics and therapeutics could equip hair stylists with useful evidence-based information they can use to help their clientele prevent and detect early stages of hair loss. By doing so, we can increase accessibility to quality hair care in the community and therefore streamline the process of alopecia patients getting the medical care they need.

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INTRODUCTION

Hair has notable social and psychological importance across all demographics and cultures. The process of losing hair can be understandably devastating to a patient's self-esteem and quality of life.¹ Alopecia is one of the most common diagnoses seen by dermatologists²; however, current data show that patients frequently search outside of the medical profession for answers regarding their hair loss.³ Community hair stylists and their clients often have close relationships due to their frequent interactions. In particular, hair stylists in the African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities have been shown to enjoy rapport with local residents that may not be available to researchers from outside those communities.^{4,5} As such, hair care professionals can be helpful in alerting unaware individuals to scalp conditions such as hair loss and directing them to medical care early in their disease course. The purpose of this pilot study is to investigate the unique resource of hair stylists as hair loss community health partners and identify how dermatologists can potentially play a key role in cosmetology education and training.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In June 2020, an IRB-approved web-based survey was distributed to 169 hair salons currently operating within New York City via email. One response per hair care professional was requested. If after two weeks no response was noted, a reminder email was sent.

RESULTS

Twenty-four NYC hair care professionals completed our survey (22% response rate), the majority of whom were Black, female, and working for more than 21 years. The majority of respondents reported having Black, Hispanic/Latino, and White clientele. Nineteen respondents (79%) learned about alopecia in cosmetology school (although only 4 participants (17%) recalled being formally taught by a dermatologist) and five (21%) did not. Twenty-three respondents (96%) reported regularly inspecting their clients' scalps for hair loss. 100% of hair stylists who did not learn about alopecia in cosmetology school reported their initial recommendation for alopecia is to see a dermatologist, as compared to 16% of those who did learn about alopecia

TABLE 1.

Sample of Survey Responses

Survey questions and responses	Learned about hair loss in cosmetology school (n=19)	Did not learn about hair loss in cosmetology school (n=5)	Overall (N=24)
Median Age	40-49	40-49	
Gender			
Female	13	4	17 (70.8%)
Male	6	1	7 (29.2%)
Career duration as a hair care professional			
6-10 years	7	0	7 (29.2%)
11-20 years	5	1	6 (25.0%)
21 or more years	7	4	11 (45.8%)
Were you ever taught by a dermatologist about hair loss/thinning?			
Yes	3	1	4 (16.7%)
No	16	4	20 (83.3%)
Do you regularly inspect your clients' scalps for growths/moles/spots?			
Yes	15	5	20 (83.3%)
No	4	0	4 (16.7%)
Do you regularly inspect your clients' scalps for hair loss/thinning?			
Yes	18	5	23 (95.8%)
No	1	0	1 (4.2%)
Do you think hair styling practices contribute to hair loss/thinning?			
Yes	11	4	15 (62.5%)
No	4	1	5 (20.8%)
I don't know	4	0	4 (16.7%)
Do you think hair loss/thinning can be prevented?			
Yes	10	5	15 (62.5%)
No	4	0	4 (16.7%)
I don't know	5	0	5 (20.8%)

in their training. Five respondents (21%) thought hair styling practices do not contribute to hair loss, regardless of whether or not they learned about alopecia in cosmetology school.

DISCUSSION

Comparing responses between stylists who learned about alopecia in cosmetology school and those who did not is illuminating with regards to initial recommendations for clients with hair loss. Stylists not formally educated about alopecia in their training initially recommend their clients obtain dermatologic care, while those who were taught on the subject often first recommend over the counter products such as vitamin supplements and shampoos. This indicates a vital area of intervention dermatologists can make in cosmetology training.

Some hair stylists incorrectly believed hair styling practices could not contribute to hair loss, also representing a potentially rectifiable gap in cosmetology curricula. This finding, coupled with the majority of respondents reporting Black clientele, is particularly troubling in light of prevalent diagnoses such as traction alopecia (TA). TA is a common form of hair loss caused by styling hair with excess tension and mitigated by low-tension hairstyles that is prevalent in all demographics but particularly persons of African descent.⁶ It is important for stylists to be aware of the connection between hairstyling and hair loss to fully address this problem and improve hair health.

Limitations of this study include lack of generalizability, recall bias, and small sample size.

Hair care professionals are on the front line of detecting alopecia within their communities. Given the abundance of unsupported and potentially harmful treatments for hair loss, it is important that stylists are well-versed in simple and effective initial treatment strategies in addition to feeling comfortable referring clients to medical care. A brief dermatologist-led educational program reviewing various causes of hair loss, simple treatment strategies, and how to promptly refer to dermatology could drastically improve delays in seeking dermatologic help for alopecia. Whether through integration into formal cosmetology training (classroom or virtual) or by means of publicly available seminars, it is clear that future development of strong relationships between dermatologists and hair care professionals offers a unique opportunity to improve hair health in our communities.

DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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AUTHOR CORRESPONDENCE

Lisa Akintilo MD MPH

E-mail:..... lisa.akintilo@nyulangone.org