
Posted on Mon, Dec. 06, 2004

Doctor: 'A light went on'

DERMATOLOGIST'S SLEUTHING HELPED SPARK PROBE OF PEDICURE INFECTIONS IN VALLEY

By April Lynch
Mercury News

Cynthia Hinz arrived at Dr. Christopher Schmidt's Los Gatos office in August. More than 30 oozing sores covered her legs, and they wouldn't heal. Then another woman with skin lesions came in, and then another.

The infections looked unusual, more serious than the cysts and abscesses that skin specialists routinely see. Schmidt started peppering his patients with questions.

"He asked about pets, where I'd been, all kinds of things," Hinz said. "Then he asked, 'Do you have pedicures?'"

Schmidt discovered the women shared a habit of patronizing pedicure salons, and "a light went on," the dermatologist recalled.

In September, Schmidt phoned Santa Clara County health officials with his suspicions, and helped launch Silicon Valley's latest piece of medical detective work. It's a mystery that has only barely begun to unravel.

State and local investigators are now scrutinizing dozens of serious skin infections that may have stemmed from local nail salons, and even now they have more questions than answers.

Such infections are rare. But the county now has at least 40 suspected cases, and more are emerging as women and their doctors link mysterious boils and skin ulcers to the outbreak. Some possible cases date to mid-2003.

'Why so many salons?'

California has had only one other big bout of such infections -- in Watsonville in 2000, when about 110 people were infected at a single nail salon. Now, in Santa Clara County, investigators are looking at seven salons.

Tests to pin down the new cases aren't complete. But if Santa Clara County's infections are definitively linked to pedicures, then California's only two big outbreaks are just one county apart.

"We are asking, 'Why so many salons?'" said Dr. Sara Cody, a county health investigator. "Why is it happening, this way, here?"

The mystery starts with an infectious microbe: non-tuberculous mycobacteria.

The bacteria often turn up in water supplies, usually at levels too low to be infectious. But the microbe can multiply in watery environments rich in organic matter, such as fish tanks -- or some pedicure footbaths.

Pedicures start with a foot soak, often done in the bath attached to a relatively new type of pedicure chair. The baths, built into the chair's base, swirl water through a system of jets and filters meant to soothe patrons' feet and legs.

The systems can also trap bits of hair, skin and other debris. If not properly sanitized, the baths' inner workings turn into a mycobacteria farm.

"The footbaths are amplifiers," Cody said. "You are kind of hosting them in there, and you can get higher bacterial counts in the water."

State standards

At Fancy Nails, the source of the Watsonville outbreak, investigators said they found gobs of bacteria-laden gunk in the workings of the footbaths. One Santa Cruz County inspector described clumps of goo "big enough to make a toupee," recalled public health nurse Marci Abrams.

After the Watsonville cases, stringent state standards were put into effect requiring thorough sanitation of pedicure footbaths, including disinfecting between each customer and regular bleaching.

But state inspectors regularly cite some nail salons for not following the rules -- when inspectors can manage it. California's Board of Barbering and Cosmetology has 17 field inspectors to check about 87,000 licensed manicurists and 210,000 cosmetologists also licensed to do nail care.

Nail industry leaders say some pedicure salons, especially busy ones that charge lower prices, still don't sanitize correctly.

"Watsonville should have woken everybody up," said Jim Casteel, vice president for Rancho Cordova-based AmeriSpa, which makes pedicure spa chairs and disinfection systems. "They have to disinfect the spa and clean it each time between each customer. Some people aren't doing it."

Owners of two of the three San Jose salons identified in Santa Clara County's investigation say they run hygienic nail businesses. Both Tamie Than, owner of Nails National at 5589 Snell Ave., and Kathy Nguyen, owner of Kathy Nails at 5353 Almaden Expressway, say they clean and sterilize their spa chairs.

"We sanitize all the time," Nguyen said. "I just don't think these problems can come from my business."

The owner of the third salon, Silver Nails II at 1080 Blossom Hill Road, has not responded to interview requests. Health officials have not released the names of four other salons mentioned less frequently by patients.

Countywide alert

After hearing from Schmidt and a few other local doctors, state and county inspectors made surprise visits to the nail salons, asking questions and collecting samples.

Doctors aren't usually required to inform public health officials of mycobacterial infections. But on Nov. 5, the county sent out an alert to physicians asking them to report stubborn skin infections in pedicure patrons.

Samples from the salons are now being tested for mycobacteria. The results probably will take weeks. In the meantime, doctors have more questions.

Is the mycobacteria in the Silicon Valley outbreak different from that in the Watsonville cases? Could the entire region's water have higher levels or tougher strains of mycobacteria that make outbreaks more likely in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties than in other places?

And what about leg shaving? In the Watsonville outbreak, scientists found that infections were more likely in women who had shaved their legs just before their pedicures. Some doctors wonder if the same holds true in cases now.

Answers months away

Answers to such questions could take months. In the meantime, doctors have individual medical puzzles to solve. Mycobacteria infections can be tough to diagnose and treat, often requiring months of strong antibiotics.

Schmidt has seen six infected patients and is helping colleagues treat more. Hinz, relieved that Schmidt pinpointed her problem, is looking at six months of antibiotics to battle her lesions.

"I have a lot of scarring," Hinz said. "We're seeing progress, but it's going to be slow. This has been unbelievably horrible."

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