Ergonomics in the Hair & Beauty Industry

Janie Tongue

Ergonomics United, UK

SUMMARY

The hair and beauty industry is a physically intensive occupational sector characterised by repetitive movements, sustained static postures, and prolonged standing. Despite its size and economic significance, the industry has received limited ergonomic attention when compared with other manual or service-based professions. As a result, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), fatigue, and work-related injuries are highly prevalent, contributing to reduced productivity, absenteeism, and premature career exit. This paper examines the role of ergonomics in improving practitioner health, performance, and career longevity within the hair and beauty industry. Using a mixed-methods approach combining literature review, workplace observation, and practitioner interviews, the paper identifies key ergonomic risk factors and evaluates the effectiveness of practical interventions. Findings indicate that targeted ergonomic strategies, such as adjustable equipment, tool redesign, posture education, and organisational support, can significantly reduce injury risk and improve wellbeing. The paper argues for the integration of ergonomics into professional training, salon design, and industry standards to support a more sustainable workforce.

KEYWORDS

Musculoskeletal disorders, hair and beauty industry

Historical Context and Industry Momentum

My commitment to advancing ergonomics within the hair and beauty industry was strengthened during a meeting with hairstylist and innovator Jonathan Goldhill, now based in Finland. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jonathan met with Dr. Najmedin Meshkati of the University of Southern California (USC), whose work in human factors and safety science was influential during a formative period for occupational safety legislation in the United States.

Jonathan was involved in discussions surrounding California State Bill 198. Landmark occupational safety legislation that required every employer to adopt, implement, and maintain a written Injury & Illness Prevention Program (IIPP). Often regarded as the most significant California OSHA development since its inception, this legislation formalised preventive safety systems within workplaces across the state.

At that time, Jonathan attempted to highlight the importance of ergonomics within the hair and beauty industry. However, the industry climate was not receptive. The professional focus was overwhelmingly centred on aesthetics, branding, and image, with limited attention given to practitioner health or long-term occupational sustainability. Ergonomics was seen as secondary, or irrelevant, to commercial success.

Today, the context has shifted. Conversations around wellbeing, workforce retention, sustainability, and professional longevity are now central to industry dialogue. The pressures facing practitioners have intensified, and the cost of inaction is clearer.

Jonathan was ahead of his time, a pioneer advocating for ergonomic responsibility when the industry was not ready to listen. I believe we are now at a pivotal moment. The conditions are

aligned, the evidence is compelling, and the urgency is visible. If Jonathan laid the early foundations, my role is to continue that mission, translating ergonomic science into practical, industry-specific application at the right time.

Ergonomic Risk Factors in the Hair and Beauty Industry

Hair and beauty professionals are exposed to a unique combination of ergonomic stressors. Unlike many industrial settings, salon environments are client-facing, time-pressured, and often constrained by space, aesthetics, and workflow demands.

Repetitive Movements

Tasks such as cutting, blow-drying, colouring, waxing, and nail treatments involve repeated hand, wrist, and arm movements. These repetitive actions place strain on tendons and nerves, increasing the risk of conditions such as tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Sustained and Awkward Postures

Professionals frequently work with elevated arms, flexed wrists, and rotated or bent spines. Prolonged forward head posture during cutting or treatment work contributes to neck and upper back strain, while twisting and leaning increase lumbar stress.

Prolonged Standing

Many practitioners stand for six to ten hours per day, often on hard flooring. Prolonged standing without adequate support is associated with lower limb fatigue, lower back pain, and circulatory issues.

Poorly Designed Tools and Equipment

Standard salon tools are often designed with aesthetics or cost in mind rather than ergonomic principles. Heavy hairdryers, non-adjustable chairs, and poorly balanced tools increase physical load and fatigue.

Methodology

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore ergonomic impacts and interventions within the hair and beauty industry.

Literature Review

A review of peer-reviewed journals and industry reports was conducted, focusing on occupational health, ergonomics, and MSD prevalence among hair and beauty professionals. Particular attention was given to studies addressing repetitive strain, neck and back pain, and hand–arm disorders.

Workplace Observation

Observational analysis was carried out in multiple salon environments to assess posture, movement patterns, workstation layout, and equipment use. These observations helped identify common ergonomic deficiencies and risk behaviours.

Practitioner Interviews and Surveys

Qualitative data were collected from practitioners across different specialisms, capturing self-reported pain, fatigue, ergonomic awareness, and coping strategies. This data provided insight into lived experiences and barriers to ergonomic adoption.

Findings

The findings consistently demonstrate a high burden of musculoskeletal discomfort and injury within the industry.

Prevalence of Musculoskeletal Disorders

Over 70% of surveyed professionals reported regular pain in at least one body region, with the neck, shoulders, lower back, and wrists most commonly affected. Many reported managing pain as a "normal" part of the job.

Impact on Productivity and Career Longevity

Chronic discomfort was linked to reduced working hours, avoidance of certain services, and increased absenteeism. Several practitioners reported considering early retirement or career change due to physical strain.

Effectiveness of Ergonomic Interventions

Where ergonomic interventions had been implemented, practitioners reported significant improvements. Adjustable client chairs, anti-fatigue mats, lightweight tools, and posture training were associated with reduced pain and fatigue.

Knowledge and Implementation Gap

While awareness of ergonomic issues was relatively high, practical implementation was inconsistent. Barriers included perceived cost, lack of formal training, and limited industry guidance.

Discussion

The findings highlight ergonomics as a critical yet underutilised factor in sustaining the hair and beauty workforce. Unlike acute injuries, MSDs develop gradually and are often normalised until they become career-ending.

Ergonomics as Preventive Strategy

Ergonomics should be viewed as a preventive health strategy rather than a reactive solution. Early intervention through education and equipment design can significantly reduce long-term injury risk.

Education and Training

Integrating ergonomics into professional training curricula is essential. Many practitioners enter the industry without formal instruction on posture, movement efficiency, or self-management strategies.

Organisational and Industry Responsibility

Salon owners, educators, manufacturers, and professional bodies all play a role in promoting ergonomic best practice. Industry-wide standards could help normalise ergonomic investment and behaviour.

Implications for Practice

Practical ergonomic improvements in the hair and beauty industry do not need to be complex or expensive. Key recommendations include:

- Adjustable seating and client positioning
- Anti-fatigue flooring solutions

- Ergonomically designed tools
- Scheduled micro-breaks and task variation
- Ongoing ergonomic education and awareness

These interventions support not only practitioner health but also service quality, consistency, and staff retention.

Conclusion

Ergonomics is fundamental to the health, performance, and sustainability of the hair and beauty industry workforce. This paper demonstrates that MSDs are widespread but largely preventable through targeted ergonomic strategies. By embedding ergonomics into training, workplace design, and industry standards, the sector can protect its professionals, reduce injury-related attrition, and promote longer, healthier careers. Addressing ergonomics is not merely a welfare issue, it is a strategic investment in the future of the profession.

References

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. (2017). *Work-related musculoskeletal disorders in the hairdressing sector*.

Roffey, D., et al. (2010). Occupational exposure and low back pain: a systematic review. *Spine Journal*, 10(1), 87–98.

Valachi, B., & Valachi, K. (2003). Mechanisms leading to musculoskeletal disorders in the hairdressing profession. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 7(1), 19–28.