

Indoor Tanning/Skin Bleaching: Workplace Ethical Dilemma

The following article deals with the health risks people take to improve their appearance. The main characters and events in the article are fictitious, but the facts are real. Read the article and think about the questions at the end. Be prepared to discuss them.

Patty's Story

"Did you hear who died last week?" Sonya whispered to her coworker over the wallboard separating their haircutting stations.

"No; who?" Andrew asked coolly, while rasping the bristles out of his electric clippers. This was the third day in a row Sonya had come in late and Andrew, who'd already done four haircuts this busy Saturday morning, wasn't in much of a mood for her flighty gossip.

"Patty...Patty Gallagher," Sonya continued, "the redhead that used to come in here to tan all the time. Remember?"

Andrew had a flickering recollection of a slim beauty he'd seen on occasion when he first started at Fantastic Clips, but that was many customers ago. "I think so," he answered hesitantly. "What'd she die from?"

Sonya poked her head above the wall. "Cancer," she said, dramatically. "She had a black mole on her back that kept growing. I heard that her whole body was covered with moles before she died."

If Andrew and Sonya had paid any attention, they might have heard a muffled sob coming from across the salon where Stacy Beauchamp was working on another customer, her back turned to the pair. She was surprised to find herself fighting tears after overhearing the conversation, but she couldn't help but wonder if Fantastic Clips' tanning beds had played a role in Patty's death from cancer. How could she continue to work here knowing the damage that tanning can cause?

Stacy had grown up next door to the Gallaghers. As one of the first few African Americans to move into Piketon, a middle-class suburb of New Orleans, Stacy's family felt out of place at times. But the Gallaghers made Stacy feel right at home. She remembered many sweltering summer afternoons lolling out by the Gallagher's swimming pool. Out of this big rowdy family of four boys and one girl, Patty was the family darling. A freckled, athletic girl two years older than Stacy, she'd treated Stacy like a little sister, teaching her the ins and outs of middle school, who to avoid, what teachers were cool, and how to put on makeup and flirt with boys.

At high school, the two girls went separate ways. The popular Patty became the senior homecoming queen and later went on to LSU on a tennis scholarship. Stacy had heard that Patty had narrowly lost out in the competition for Miss Louisiana.

Stacy's dad still occasionally talked to Patty's brother Sonny, who worked up in Lafayette, so Stacy knew bits and pieces of the story.

A couple of years ago, doctors diagnosed Patty with malignant melanoma, a form of skin cancer. Patty blamed the skin cancer on the tanning beds she'd used as a teenager. No one had told her back then that frequent use of tanning beds could be dangerous. The doctors were able to remove the growth on her back, but a routine checkup several months later revealed that the cancer had spread throughout her body. She had some more surgery and chemotherapy but nothing worked. Patty grew sicker. She weighed only 80 pounds when she died.

So, she used to come here to tan! Stacy thought, gritting her teeth. She glared at the back room of the salon where the tanning beds were located. Day after day in winter, she'd watched, without much

thought, all those young white girls march back there—like little lambs, she thought—to bronze up for Mardi Gras or spring break. *Don't they know?*

She'd looked up some facts on the Internet after Patty's death. Melanoma, the most deadly form of skin cancer, kills some 8,000 American each year. Most scientists think that exposure to ultraviolet radiation—either from the sun or a tanning lamp—increases a person's risk of getting skin cancer. The United States has a \$2 billion tanning industry. Each year about 28 million people in North America go to tanning salons and 2.3 million of them are teenagers. Several states now have laws pending to prohibit minors from going to tanning salons.

Stacy thought such laws weren't a bad idea. After all, if minors can't buy cigarettes or drink alcohol because they're too young to assess the risks, then the same reasoning should apply to tanning beds.

"You okay?" said the balding customer looking up at her from the chair.

"Yeah; I'm sorry. I just got distracted for a moment...Do you need more taken off the back, sir?"

Stacy continued the haircut but throughout the day had a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach.

That night, she confided to her husband Marc. "I don't know if I can work there anymore after hearing about Patty." She said, "It's beginning to affect my work. Now I hear Greg, the salon owner, has big plans for the salon. He wants to expand the business by adding more tanning beds. And he has big plans for me, too. He wants more African American clientele so he's asking me to oversee a line of skin whitening products to sell."

"Skin what...?"

"Whitening products, you know, like bleach. Greg says they're really popular around the Caribbean and in Africa. He thinks they could be popular here too. Women and some guys buy this expensive cream to make themselves look whiter. Only, if they misuse it, it can damage their skin. It's just like the white girls with the tanning beds. Why do people do this just so they can look the way they think is cool?"

"Get another job," Marc yawned.

"I don't know. Ever since the bookstore next door to the salon closed down, Greg's been real serious about expanding. I think he's really gonna lease the extra space...Could mean more money for us, Marc. Greg likes me, and I already have 40 regular customers there."

"Why don't you sleep on it?"

"Okay, but I'm beginning to doubt whether I even want to stay in the business now..."

Questions to Consider

- 1) What would you do the next day if you were Stacy?
- 2) Stacy fears that Patty's melanoma was caused by the tanning beds she used. What other factors might have contributed to Patty's cancer? How might knowing about these factors affect Stacy's decision to stay at her job?
- 3) If you worked at a company that sold cosmetic products which could harm 1 person in a thousand, would you stay there? What about 1 person in a million?
- 4) Suppose that Stacy decided that it was morally wrong to continue working at the salon, but she realized that if she quits, someone else will just take her place. Should she keep her job, since others will be harmed no matter what, or should she act on principle?

- 5) Suppose the salon required patrons to read statement about the risks of tanning or whitening, and then sign a waiver saying that they understand that these procedures bring with them possibly serious risks. Can someone rationally sign such a document? Suppose the salon walls were covered with posters of beautiful, tanned people apparently living the good life. Would that make it more difficult to be rational? If it would, would it be ethical for the salon owner to have such posters on the walls?
- 6) Automobile accidents cause about 40,000 American deaths each year. Your annual risk of dying in a car wreck is about 1 in 5,000. Should this statistic keep you from working for an automobile manufacturer or car dealership? Is selling cars different than selling cosmetics? Why and how?
- 7) Around the world, many dark-skinned people use products to lighten their skin. Why do you think dark-skinned people would want to look lighter? Why would light skinned people want to look darker?

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