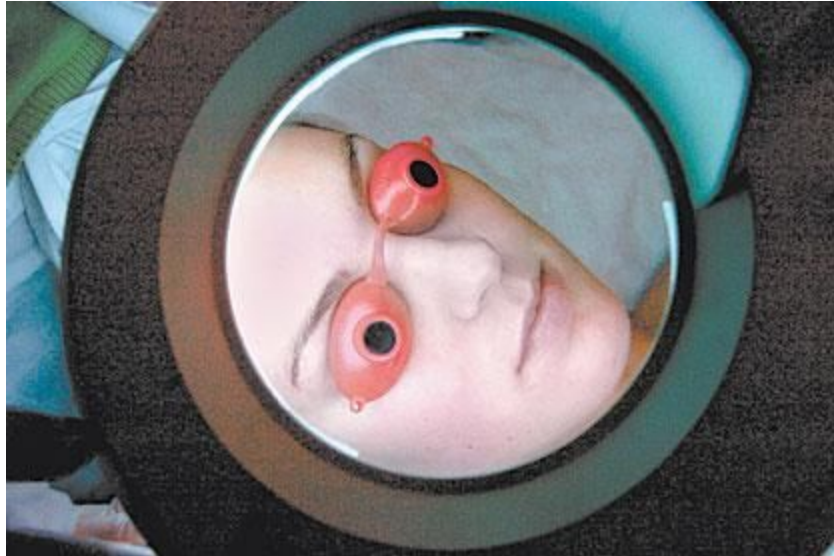


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Aestheticians hope licensing will keep out the bad apples



Rachel Ward, above, has her face examined before her facial at Virginia Institute of Esthetics on High Street in Portsmouth. Facial treatments would require the practitioner to have a basic license under new legislation. More complicated procedures, like chemical peels, would require an advanced license. JOHN H. SHEALLY

II/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT.

By **CAROLYN SHAPIRO**, The Virginian-Pilot

© March 14, 2005

In Virginia, professional who braids hair, does body waxing or polishes nails must have a license.



But a person can pierce a client's skin with an extraction tool, remove dead skin with a suction machine or apply acids to someone's face after doing little more than hanging a sign over a door.

Virginia has never regulated aestheticians or required them to hold licenses, whether they perform a seaweed facial or the sophisticated processes of microdermabrasion and chemical peels. It is one of just two states – the other is Connecticut, according to aestheticians – without oversight of the profession.

That's going to change with a bill that passed the General Assembly this year. If Gov. Mark R. Warner signs the legislation, as expected, the state Board for Barbers and Cosmetology will add two members to represent aestheticians and develop standards and training criteria that aestheticians will have to meet to practice in the state as of July 2007.

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A group of working aestheticians, led by two Hampton Roads women, fought for the legislation to elevate the industry. Aesthetics, the study of beauty and its effect on people, has grown into a field of trained clinicians who care for the body's largest organ, skin.

Saphonia Gee owns an aesthetics school in Portsmouth and plans to open a skin-care center in Virginia Beach this spring with her partner, Kim Thumel.

She said that they were motivated to push for the bill because the lack of licensing is an insult to those who take the profession seriously.

"It just makes the industry itself look bad," Gee said. "And it's dangerous."

An aesthetician is someone who treats skin to enhance beauty. Until recently, only wealthy consumers or Europeans had aestheticians, Gee said.

But skin-care centers – part of the boom in the anti-aging business – have multiplied in Hampton Roads faster than freckles in the sun. Consumers can buy microdermabrasion kits in drug stores, hair salons now call themselves day spas and plastic surgeons have added aestheticians to offer non-medical treatments.

U.S. spa industry revenues have grown from \$5 billion in 1999 to \$11.2 billion in 2003, according to the International Spa Association, an industry trade group. The number of spas more than doubled between August 2000 and June 2004, with day spas accounting for about 72 percent.

State licensing aims to protect consumers from faulty practices that could damage their appearance and possibly their health. But skilled aestheticians also hope that licensing will keep out the bad apples who could scare consumers away from the whole bunch with one wrong treatment.

"They were getting to the point where they were starting to deal with some very high-tech equipment," said Del. John J. Welch III, the Virginia Beach Republican who sponsored the aesthetician-licensing bill. "Everybody and anybody who wanted to open a – in quotations – day spa could do this stuff."

This stuff includes chemical peels, a process of exfoliating the skin using high concentrations of glycolic acid, salicylic acid or other chemicals. Microdermabrasion involves a machine with a handheld wand that rubs finely ground crystals across the face as an abrasive or polish, as it sucks up the removed skin like a vacuum. For lymphatic drainage, another advanced technique, aestheticians use their hands to smooth the skin firmly from the head to the shoulders, aiming to push out toxins.

The state's aestheticians applaud the bill for recognizing and establishing professional standards. But the industry has divided over the two-tier structure of the licensing.

The Professional Esthetic Alliance (many in the industry prefer to drop the "a" in "aesthetic") is a Virginia group that formed about a year ago to push for state licensing. The alliance fought the bill's designation of a basic level of training for a regular aesthetics license and a higher level for a "master aesthetician." The basic license will allow an aesthetician to perform most facial treatments, cosmetics applications and hair lightening or removal.

The master license will require schooling in the more-advanced techniques of microdermabrasion, chemical exfoliation and lymphatic drainage.

"We went from a state with no licensing to a state with the most licensing," said Chris Werne, owner of Chrysm Day Spa and Chrysm Institute of Esthetics in Virginia Beach.

Werne and other opponents of the master designation argued that it downgrades the basic aesthetician into a lower class. At the same time, it allows no room for advanced aestheticians to choose the areas they want to study because it forces them to spend extra classroom time and money on techniques they might never use.

"I think that kind of ties the hands of the professional," Werne said.

Welch answers that the two-tier system, modeled after a similar law in Utah, gives the freedom of less-stringent training for aestheticians who are just doing facials and don't want to study the advanced methods. The law also includes a "grandfather clause" to permit aestheticians to waive training and

examination if they have been practicing for at least three years, have completed training that meets the board's approval or hold a license reflecting comparable standards from another state.

But the law reins in the industry as well, specifying that aestheticians could perform no treatments using lasers, which have also become popular for skin problems and hair removal. Welch said he deferred to plastic surgeons who expressed concern that this procedure would fall out of their oversight. That would make it illegal for the Hampton Roads businesses that currently list laser treatments among their services to continue those practices.

Many skin-care workers will say they have a license if they hold one from another state. Some local day spas hire only aestheticians that have this background.

Some practitioners say they are "certified" to indicate that they completed training courses led by companies that provide the products or equipment they use.

Aestheticians and state representatives had no explanations for why Virginia had never licensed this profession. Welch suspected that it might stem from the state's tendency to keep hands off businesses.

"Virginia isn't really a 'nanny' state," he said. "Nanny state means government is involved in everything. Less is best when it comes to governing."

Then again, the state has held cosmetologists, nail professionals, hair stylists, waxing technicians and tattoo artists to specific standards for years. But many legislators never knew what aestheticians even did, Welch said.

"You're doing facials, you're doing mud baths – who cares?" Welch said. But state law had to catch up with the industry, he added.

Welch's bill estimates that 2,000 individuals will seek an aesthetics license when it is available, though no one in the state's industry has precise numbers for working professionals. The fees they will pay – including an annual \$27.50 per license and \$125 to \$175 for an exam – would cover the administrative costs, the bill specifies.

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