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Personnel Selling Nail Guns Know Little About the Dangerous Tools

DURHAM, N.C. – Buyer beware may be the best approach when it comes to purchasing a nail gun. Duke University Medical Center researchers found that personnel selling these dangerous tools know little about them or how to use them safely, despite a number of effective safety measures available.

The researchers visited 217 businesses that sell or rent nail guns, and posed as new users interested in purchasing the tools for a home project, such as framing a deck or fence. Sales personnel were given a chance to volunteer safety information about the tools, and if they didn't, the researchers asked a general question about the safety of the tools. If the salespeople still did not offer accurate safety information, the researchers asked specific questions about nail guns, the risks involved with using them and the different trigger types available.

The team received some source of misinformation at almost 75 percent of the businesses they visited, even though 62 percent of the salespeople had previously used a nail gun. And, 59 percent of the salespeople they encountered failed to provide any suggestions for safe use.

"It's alarming that a consumer, whether it's a contractor buying for their working population or a home user buying for their own use, doesn't get better information – particularly given the devastating nature of some of these injuries and the risk of 'stand-by' exposures to other workers or family members," said Hester Lipscomb, Ph.D., professor in the Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Duke University and lead author of the study.

The businesses, which included both home improvement big-box stores and places that sell directly to builders or contractors, like lumberyards, were located in four areas of the U.S. – North Carolina, West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania, Missouri and southern Illinois, and Texas.

Salespeople in outlets that sold primarily to contractors were more likely to offer safety information, but only half of them did. In general, some salespeople provided helpful, correct information, but they were the exception.

During the team's assessment, researchers were often assured that the tools were safe to use, even in the context of a salesperson relaying a story about somebody else that got hurt. For example, one person explained the tools were safe but then indicated you could shoot a nail through your hand.

"We were all surprised at being reassured that the tools were safe while also being told about people who had been injured," Lipscomb said. "We were also surprised by the attitude of being very much accepting of injury."

One salesperson in a lumberyard told one of the researchers to, "get a buddy and the operator's manual and four or five beers and you're good to go."

"This cavalier attitude about the use of a potentially lethal tool is irresponsible and very disturbing," Lipscomb said.

More than 35,000 injuries from nail guns are treated in U.S. emergency departments every year and about 14,000 are among consumers. Lipscomb's research, published in 2007, showed a surge in nail gun injury rates as use of the tools became more widespread among consumers. Since then, Lipscomb's team has focused its research on safety awareness related to the sequential trigger, which cuts the risk of acute injury in half when used instead of the more common contact trip trigger.

"Since there is not a requirement for the safer trigger, the point of sale becomes a very vital source of information about the tools and their triggers," Lipscomb explained.

Lipscomb and her colleagues believe the problem is that sales personnel do not have access to the information that they need and are not aware of the voluntary industry standard issued in 2003 that called for nail guns to be shipped with the safer sequential trigger. They believe this demonstrates the lack of effectiveness from such voluntary standards.

"Unfortunately, neither the Consumer Product Safety Commission nor the Occupational Safety and Health Administration have requirements that address the acute injury risk associated with use of these tools," Lipscomb said. She sees an opportunity for these two government agencies to join forces to require an existing engineering solution to protect both workers and consumers doing do-it-yourself projects.

The research is published online on in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*.

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Co-authors of the study include James Nolan and Dennis Patterson, of the Carpenters District Council of Greater St. Louis; Mark Fullen and Brandon Takacs of West Virginia University; and Lisa A. Pompeii, of The University of Texas School of Public Health.

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