

Karen marches into the salon, her eyes ablaze. Her hair is coming out by the handful, leaving ugly, bald patches all over her scalp. "Oh God," you think, as you remember doing her perm three weeks before. What do you do? Or, more precisely, what don't you do? Andrew Don reports

How to handle those HAIRY MOMENTS

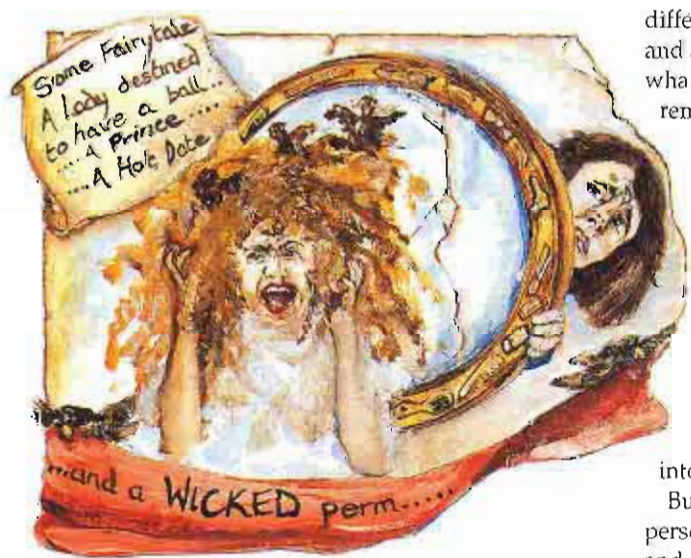
Sit Karen down. Look upset, but don't burst into tears. When your client is in such an emotional state, it is imperative you keep control.

She, of course, is making all kinds of accusations: you've wrecked her marriage; next door's kids keep pushing Right Said Fred T-shirts through the letter box; if she hangs herself it will be all your fault...

Your heart sinks. It's possible you might have slipped up when following the instructions on that new perm solution. But if you say you're sorry, her solicitors could have a field day.

It's no good wishing that one of the other stylists had done it.

Remember it's the salon that will get sued, not the individual.



“96% of solicitor Brigitte Goff's cases would never have reached her if the hairdresser concerned had used a bit of intelligence”

Complaints

Whatever their nature, complaints will always come as body-blows to the pride of stylists and salon alike, but they can be divided into three basic categories:

- The perception complaint, when the hairstyle is not to the customer's liking, but the hairdresser has, technically, not done anything wrong
- The hairdresser's had an off day and the work is a bit tacky
- The client's hair or scalp has been physically damaged

Most complaints will fall into the first two categories. And yet, if Karen's falls into the third, you could, potentially, be facing a fine of several thousand pounds.

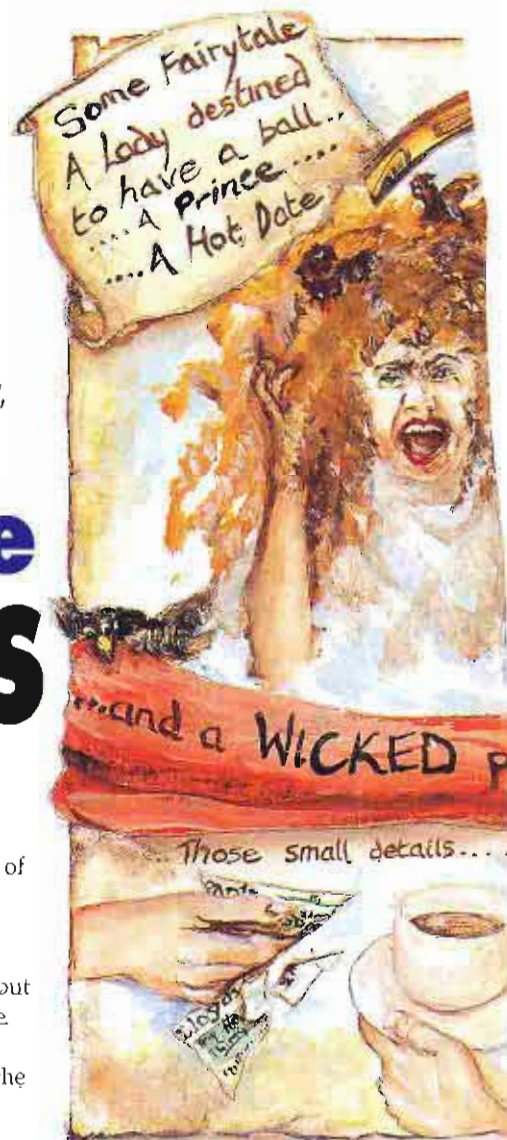
Your initial reaction when the complaint is made is crucial. It can make all the difference between defusing the situation, and aggravating it beyond all control. So, whatever your personal feelings, try to remain calm, polite and understanding.

Arguing back will probably make the client more angry and is not good for the salon's image.

Brigitte Goff, the solicitor who specialises in suing hairdressers, says good PR and pampering can make a whole world of difference. According to Ms Goff, 96% of the cases she's handled would never have reached her had the hairdressers concerned used a bit of intelligence.

But many hairdressers take complaints personally, as opposed to professionally, and make things worse for themselves by doing all the wrong things.

"I spoke to the hairdresser and the manager," says one litigant, whose hair broke off in clumps following a perm. "They told me they would treat it. I have to say it didn't make any difference, in my opinion. They did cut my hair into a shape



that was a little more presentable. But I was charged £9.50 for the privilege."

Another litigant, whose hair began to drop out after a professional straightening treatment, claims: "My hair continued to fall out and, after about two weeks, the state of my hair became progressively worse. I was given a number of appointments for steam treatment and had about five. The stylist did not charge me, but after the last treatment, he told me that it was about time that I started paying."

Consultant trichologist and lecturer Carol Walker says: "A lot of hairdressers charge for rectification and that is wrong. It incenses the client. If someone botches up your car, you don't pay the same garage to repair it."

How to react

If a client approaches you with a complaint there are seven basic steps you should take:

- Receive the client pleasantly and politely
- Discuss the nature of the complaint
- Analyse it carefully and sympathetically
- Diagnose the fault and suggest corrective action
- Agree with the client what is to be done
- Carry out the correction then and there, or agree a time for the client to return
- For future reference, record the



complaint and the action taken

When Nof Pashialis, partner of Alphabet Haircutters in Kenton, Middlesex, is faced with a complaint and the customer asks, "What are you going to do about it?" he replies: "What would you like me to do about it?"

That, he explains, immediately knocks the aggression out of the customer.

"Most clients expect you to deny there is anything wrong and expect an argument," he says. "If you stay calm, you can come to a solution in the salon within ten minutes."

But what do you do if you believe the client is making false accusations? Many salon owners will not contact their insurers, whom they think would rather pay out a claim than mount what could turn into a costly defence.

One salon boss, who does not want to be named, reports that the worst complaint he has dealt with was a customer who claimed the hairdresser's carelessness had resulted in her face being disfigured by bleach.

Try as he might, the hairdresser was unable to detect the damage, which, the woman claimed, had been covered by make-up. "We didn't believe her and refused to refund her the money," he says.

The client went on to produce a letter

from her doctor which claimed there was a faint line down her face, which may have been caused by bleach.

"She was trying it on," continues the salon owner. "We didn't contact our insurance company because we didn't want them to get involved. They might have paid out. I resent the idea of paying out when we hadn't done anything wrong - our premium would have gone up. You have to stand up to them and not let them get away with it."

In this instance, the client caved in and the salon did not have to pay out any compensation. But deciding that someone is making false accusations and taking the step of not telling your insurers can be tricky, especially if the complaint is a serious one.

Remember, when there has been real damage done to the client's hair, such as it breaking off after a perm or become discoloured after tinting, there may be difficulties in putting it right. You should then inform the salon's insurers.

According to the Hairdressing Insurance Bureau, there are three golden rules:

- Never admit liability
- Report the claim immediately
- Pass on all unanswered correspondence to your insurers

Hairdressers Insurance Bureau assistant director Ros McDonnell says that dealing with a client who is making a claim against you can be stressful, and requires a lot of tact and common sense.

If the claim is for injury, it is likely that

the client will not return to you. But, if he/she believes that you and your insurer have dealt fairly and promptly with the grievance, he/she is less likely to publicise her complaint and you might even retain your client.

Consultant trichologist Carol Walker says there is one simple way of avoiding most of the serious complaints for injury - perform strand and skin tests before embarking on any technical services. Most salons don't do them because they are not commercially viable. Ms Walker calls this disgusting. "This is why we get the complaints we do," she says. She's got a point. ■



Ros McDonnell - dealing with a complaint requires a lot of tact

ble. But I was

" began to brightening continued to eeks, the essively of ment and had charge me, told me that l paying." lecturer hairdressers it is wrong. ne botches up me garage to