

An article from The Herald-Sun, Sunday July 08, 2007

## **Auto mechanics often suffer from lack of knowledge**

By Andrew Dunn

Before Nate Smith went into automotive teaching at Durham Technical Community College, one of his jobs was to go to people's houses and see if their car problem was the fault of the last repair work. When many people think of trouble with an automobile repairman, they imagine paying hundreds of dollars and the car simply being ignored.

But Smith, program director of Automotive Systems Technology at Durham Tech, said that much more often the repairman is just not properly trained for his job. That can turn something as simple as an oil change into a major problem.

"I don't think our dishonesty problem is as large as our ignorance problem," Smith said.

And he has seen it all in his line of work.

He knows one of his students at Durham Tech was effectively retraining his superiors at a national auto repair chain. He's also seen auto mechanics who were working fast-food the week before.

Auto mechanics are not regulated by any legislation. Anyone can buy a business privilege license for \$15 from the city of Durham and open a shop.

Smith said most people don't bother to check out the mechanic's credentials before entrusting him with their car.

"Would you leave your kid at a day care you don't feel comfortable with?" he asked. "Why would you leave your car keys in the hands of someone who's an idiot?"

Smith said an unscrupulous mechanic is harder to find because dishonesty quickly will put him out of business. A dishonest mechanic could take you for some money, but an unqualified mechanic is much more dangerous, he said.

"Surgeons can only kill one patient at a time," Smith said. "A mechanic that screws up a brake job could wipe out a family or two."

What can you do to make sure you get good, qualified service?

First and foremost, Smith said, is not assuming the mechanic knows what he's doing.

Then:

- Make sure your mechanic is ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) certified, meaning he passed an exam. Look for a big blue cog hanging in the shop, and ask to see documentation of the certificate. If the mechanic becomes defensive, leave.
- Find out the name of the mechanic who's going to be working on your car. Tell him that you will be back to talk with him about what he finds.
- If you're new to an area, ask community leaders or neighbors to recommend a mechanic. That will help ensure the person has experience and ethics.
- If you feel like you have received bad service, file a written complaint with the company immediately.

## Be safe when fixing your car

So you've decided to do a little work on your own car. Thousands of other Americans did, too, this year. But about 5,000 of them ended up in the hospital while doing so, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Nate Smith, program director of Automotive Systems Technology at Durham Tech Community College, said just a few measures can keep you safe while changing the oil or replacing a filter.

- Read about and study the repair to be done and the parts involved before you touch anything.
- Use proper safety apparel, especially eye goggles.
- Don't jack the car unless you have to. If you do, be sure to use jack stands and follow the correct procedure, found in the car's owner's manual or online at [http://www.cdtextbook.com/PDF/ws/usefloorjack\\_WS.pdf?zoom\\_highlight=jack+stands](http://www.cdtextbook.com/PDF/ws/usefloorjack_WS.pdf?zoom_highlight=jack+stands).
- Don't fiddle with things if you don't know what they are. It can be dangerous.
- Think twice before doing anything to a hybrid car. The electricity used in a hybrid engine is powerful enough to weld with.