

Reasons Behind the Ink

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PRACTICE POINTS

- Individuals who get tattoos often are more educated and well informed than previously thought, more likely leading them to seek removal if desired.
- Our results indicate that tattoos are not regretted as often as previously speculated.

Historically, tattoos have been used for therapeutic practices and as signs of social status in primitive cultures. In this study, we sought to develop a greater understanding of the reasons individuals choose to get tattoos. Three hundred sixty-three patients with at least 1 tattoo from among our clinic patients volunteered to complete an 18-question, multiple-choice survey. Questions focused on level of education, family background, and reason for getting a tattoo, among other factors.

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Tattoos have been viewed as one of the most exotic forms of art for thousands of years. In ancient times, tattoos were used mainly for therapeutic and status purposes. According to British archeologist Joann Fletcher, the oldest evidence of tattoo use was found on the famous “Iceman,” a 5200-year-old frozen mummy that was discovered more than 20 years ago.¹ Tattoos were thought to be a form of therapy used to decrease joint pain. On the other hand, the ancient Egyptians used tattoos

as symbols of wealth and high status; surprisingly, only women were tattooed. Fletcher also reported that tattoos were used as a form of therapy during pregnancy in upper-class women.¹

Tattoos have served different purposes in the last few centuries, making their way to the United States at the start of the 20th century.² New York City became the tattoo capital of the country. During this early period, male artists often would tattoo their wives so that they could advertise their work. After the Prohibition era, tattoos became widely used within the US Military, becoming a way to show pride and patriotism.²

Due to the permanent nature of tattoos, we sought to understand the reasons for obtaining this particular genre of body art. The purpose of this study was to provide a greater understanding of the current demographics of individuals who get tattoos, looking at specific trends in age and level of education of those who get tattoos as well as the motivation for tattoo placement. As dermatologists, it is essential to understand this patient population to be able to provide services (ie, tattoo removal) in the safe setting of a physician’s office.

Methods

The study was conducted at a private dermatology clinic in the Chicago (Illinois) metropolitan area with no institutional review board approval. Between January 2011 and December 2012, local patients with at least 1 tattoo were asked, with assumed consent, to fill out an investigator-developed survey containing 18 multiple-choice questions regarding

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age, educational and family background, and other factors. The race and gender of the respondents as well as the number of patients who declined to complete the survey were not recorded.

Results

A total of 363 patients completed the in-person survey. Responses were tabulated and converted into percentages for comparison (N=363). Data analysis was divided into 3 parameters: education level, health concerns, and motivation for getting a tattoo. Figure 1 shows that 70% of respondents had obtained a college degree or higher.

With regard to health concerns associated with tattoos, the majority of respondents (71%) claimed they were not concerned with the health risks (eg, infection with human immunodeficiency virus or hepatitis C virus) associated with getting a tattoo. Also, only 6% of respondents admitted to being under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time

of getting a tattoo. Of 21 respondents who claimed drugs and/or alcohol were part of their tattoo experience, the highest level of education was high school in 7 respondents and 2 got their first tattoo when they were younger than 14 years.

Survey results revealed that the majority of respondents got a tattoo as an act of remembrance (Figure 2). For example, one respondent reported getting a tattoo for religious purposes, while another got a tattoo to celebrate and mark each level of completed education (ie, high school, college, graduate school). However, a high percentage of respondents (26%) got a tattoo for fun.

Comment

Although ancient tattoos were used for therapeutic purposes, this study revealed that tattoos are now obtained by individuals with higher levels of education to remember a loved one or purely for enjoyment. The potential health risks associated with

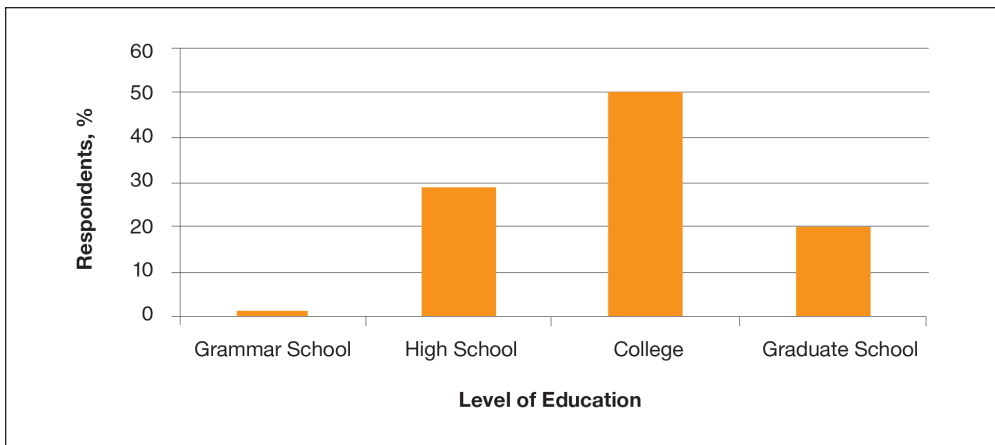


Figure 1. Highest level of education completed by survey respondents (N=363).

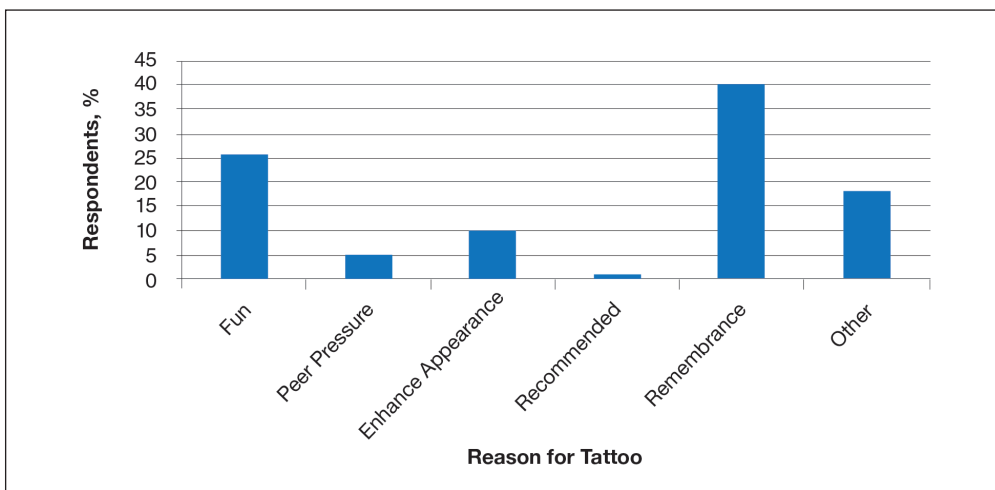


Figure 2. Self-reported reasons for getting a tattoo among survey respondents (N=363).

getting a tattoo did not deter the respondents in this study. Converse to the popular belief that individuals are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol when getting a tattoo, our study found that only 6% of respondents were under the influence. A comparable trend was found among US military service members in a similar study.³ The majority of respondents did not regret their tattoos and did not report taking a mind-altering substance. Tattoos serve as a symbol of one's proud individualism.³ However, a 2001 study found a correlation between greater use of alcohol and marijuana among college students with tattoos and piercings.⁴ These circumstances may lead patients to seek consultation from a dermatologist for tattoo removal. Therefore, it is important to have a better understanding of this particular patient population to facilitate care in an efficient manner.

Evaluation of the gender and race of survey respondents would be useful in the future. Financial

status of respondents also may be explored, as wealth and status were used by the ancient Egyptians to determine who could get a tattoo. A follow-up analysis on removal of tattoos also will be explored in the future.

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