

11-4-11 Tattoo Tattles

Somebody recently dropped a dime on an unpermitted tattoo business. Actually two dimes were dropped and I am glad they were. I don't want an outbreak of something like hepatitis C in my town from untrained practices involving needles.

Don't get me wrong: I am not opposed to or sitting in judgment of tattoos. In fact, as a graduate assistant for the BSC Art Department (now BSU) I included Tattoo Artist for an A to Z list of artistic occupations. It was my first assignment. Tattoo Artist was promptly removed with a throat-clearing reminder of professionalism!

Despite my prediction that tattoos would become even more popular, I did not imagine a future filled with reality shows such as LA Ink or how extremely popular and even commonplace tattoos would become. While the trend was growing, you still had to travel to another state to get one. There was one summer when one of my children announced, "I can't wait until this summer! I'm going to Rhode Island and I'm going to get a tattoo and have my belly button pierced! It's going to be awesome!" I was glad that at least a car ride stood in between her natural body and an inked and pierced one. She never did have those procedures and I know that this young mother of two is now glad that she didn't.

In 2001 health agents were given very short notice that tattoos would become legal in the state of Massachusetts. We had no regulations for them and I had been a health agent for only a year. But that didn't matter, for neophytes and veterans alike, we all had to scramble to have regulations assuring the safety for Massachusetts residents. As we researched the topic and looked at regulations from other states we were astounded at the variety of procedures under the heading of Body Art. For many of us, it opened up a whole new world and we had to very quickly recover from our squeamishness. The skin could be cut and braided. Any part of the body you can imagine might be pierced. Tattooing placed inks in a variety of colors, from a variety of chemicals, under the skin with needles. Why bother applying eyeliner each morning when you could have your eyelids "tattooed" to accomplish the same look? Permanent makeup!

These procedures, although done for a variety of reasons including aesthetics and spiritual, were very much like medical procedures and we quickly realized a certain level of medical knowledge was necessary for them to be done safely.

The environment for these practices also needed to be controlled. The importance of cleanliness and the necessity of sanitizing needed to be understood and practiced. Sometimes there was room for choices, such as using pre-sterilized single-use needles or sterilizing equipment with such methods as autoclaving. Not only did the practitioner need to learn the importance of sanitation, some knowledge of human anatomy was also required. By the time the

regulations were completed, we were satisfied that a permitted and inspected body art business could be conducted in a safe manner.

When you get a tattoo you should expect a clean environment and for the practitioner to wash hands and use gloves. You should expect evidence of sterilized instruments and needles. You should see a permit from the Board of Health on the wall. If you have hired a traveling body artist, you should still see the permit from the Board of Health and the same evidence of sanitation. If the practitioner is really conscientious you might be asked to sign a statement indicating you have witnessed hand washing, use of gloves and single use pre-sterilized instruments. If you don't see the evidence of a safe and sanitary and permitted practitioner, you should decline and seek that artwork elsewhere.

For many years, hepatitis C has been on the increase. Hepatitis C is only one of the unintended guests you might receive when you get that tattoo. It's not worth it.

Really want it? Get it done right, get it done safely and get it from a trained and permitted professional. And you know what else? Some are beautifully drawn and crafted while others range from fuzzy to lousy. Shop around.

Do you know of an unpermitted body art business or a traveling tattoo artist? Do not hesitate to contact your local board of health to inquire about this business. While you're there pick up a copy of body art regulations and read how it should be done in a way that will keep you safe. It's a real eye opener. Concerned? Don't hesitate to drop a dime.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can tell her about tattoo parties and your favorite body artist at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us