

Taboo Tattoos

Tattoos in prison can paint a risky picture

by Wayne Campbell

Tattooing is an integral part of prison arts culture, despite being prohibited in Canadian prisons. Inmates can face punishments ranging from loss of privileges to lockup. Nevertheless, tattooing thrives in Canadian prisons as an art of rebellion. Forty-five percent of federal inmates report getting a tattoo while incarcerated.

The practice of tattooing in prison can be dangerous. Not only can a tattoo gun can be used as a weapon, but certain tat-

A healthcare issue

Since 1996, neither federal nor provincial correctional systems have acted to address this issue. Although legislation and policies dictate that inmates are entitled to the same standard of healthcare as persons in the general community, inmates do not have the same tools and resources to protect their health when they are tattooing. Even the most basic community standards are not assured.

By not providing safeguards, the cor-

eral and provincial institutions.” This reclassification would allow for a safer, self-regulated tattooing environment.

Alternatively, the prison system could create a new type of peer education/career path program. Artistically gifted inmates would be formally trained as qualified tattoo artists. These inmates could then provide clean tattoos to other inmates. While this is a safer alternative, it would also cost more.



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too designs can escalate hostilities among inmates and provoke conflicts. The tattooing process can also spread communicable diseases through infected needles.

Done safely by a skilled artist, tattooing won't endanger your health. However, if proper precautions are not taken, the risk of spreading hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV is high.

rectional system is exacerbating the health risks of tattooing. However, there are ways to reduce the hazards of tattooing in prison. The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network's 1996 final report on HIV/AIDS in prisons recommends that "Tattooing and piercing equipment and supplies should be classified as hobby-craft equipment and be authorized for use in all fed-

Safe tattooing practices

Help ensure that the process gives you a permanent piece of art and not an added life sentence. The following guidelines are from a pamphlet entitled "Tattooing and You: The Safeguards within Prison" published by the Prisoner's HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN).

► **Choose a reputable artist**

Take your time. Before getting tattooed, especially if you have just arrived in prison, consider your choices. Know what design you want. Ask around about artists. Check out as much of your chosen artist's work as possible beforehand, and, if possible, observe the artist actually tattooing someone. These steps will help you make an empowered decision.

► **Know the equipment.**

Everything the artist uses should be brand new. The artist you choose should be able to prepare the needle, shaft for the ink, and tip for the needle in front of you.

► **Ensure that the equipment is clean.**

Boil the tattoo equipment—sometimes referred to as “works”—for at least 15 minutes, if necessary. Providing your own works is the best way to ensure your own safety. If you cannot, the tattoo artist needs to be adept at making the equipment fast. If the artist cannot make the new needle in front of you, tell him to take a hike.

You can make the tip and shaft from a pen or a lighter. A pack of guitar strings makes inexpensive needles. Needles should be razor sharp. The shorter the point, the longer the needle will stay sharp. One way to sharpen needles is with a small piece of sandpaper attached to a fan. The tattoo artist should wear latex gloves and have a clean towel. If possible, make sure his work area is relatively clean and well lit. If your tattoo is not finished that day, keep the works, so you can be certain that no one else uses them. Wipe down the equipment with alcohol after you use it.

► **Know your ink.**

Although waterproof black is the preferred ink, it's extremely expensive and hard to get. You can make black ink by burning paper and mixing it with water to make a thick paste. If you can't provide your own ink, your artist should mix up the ink in front of you so that you know it is disease-free. Do not reuse or share your ink: if you are HIV-positive and/or have hepatitis B or hepatitis C, you could

potentially pass those diseases on to someone else.

► **Know what “safe work” means.**

Since tattooing can be stressful on the body, have it done on a day that you are feeling healthy. To reduce the risk of any potential infection, ensure your artist holds the tattoo gun straight up, not tilted. In addition, the artist should not break through all the layers of skin, which could cause infection and/or heavy scarring. Some scarring will always occur, but the ink of the tattoo should cover it.

► **Ensure safe disposal.**

After the tattoo is completed, all the equipment should be treated as medical waste. Throw away the needle and tube or shaft that the needle goes in, as well as the ink, the ink cap, the gloves, and the towel. Don't ever reuse any of the medical waste on another person. Cut off the point of the needle and bend it back before you throw it out or flush it to ensure you're not spreading any disease.

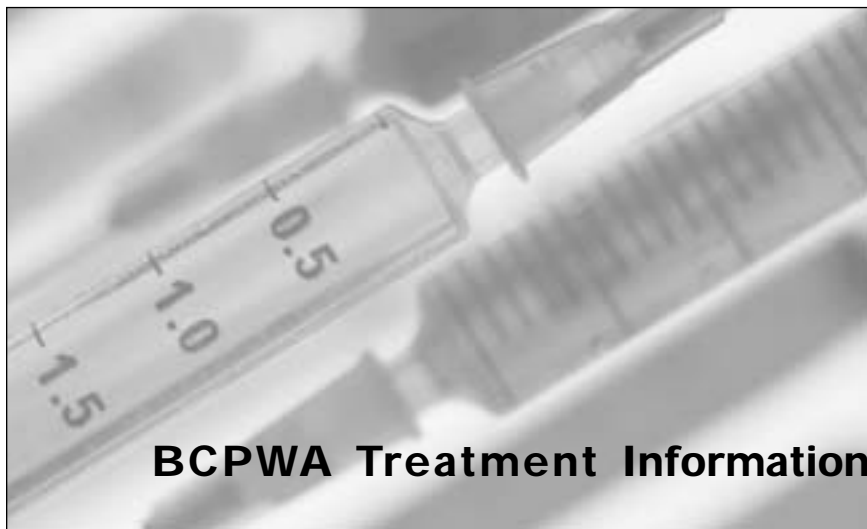
► **Aftercare.**

Keep the tattoo area clean, but do not use alcohol or hydrogen peroxide on the tattoo itself. Don't pick at scabs because doing so can lead to scarring. For approximately one month or until the tattoo is healed, avoid prolonged exposure to the sun. If you have a reaction to the ink or become infected, visit someone in healthcare.

In the future, inmates may have other tattooing options available to them. In the meantime, neither federal nor provincial correctional systems provide Canadian inmates with even the most basic information on safer tattooing practices. It is time this situation was remedied. Immediate action is needed to address this ongoing health concern. ⊕



Wayne Campbell is the treasurer of the board of the BCPWA Society.



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