

Quality Corner

Your Colorful New Career

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So, you're tired of the evening-night-weekend-holiday shifts? You're tired of a supervisor who doesn't understand the meaning of "team" and issues orders like a military general? You're tired of a job that doesn't seem to hold any future for you? Well, have I got a job for you! This one's important! You can make a valuable contribution to the health of your community! What job is that, you ask? Why, of course, I'm talking about becoming a quality consultant in the burgeoning field of . . . tattooing!

I'm serious. I read an article in my community's local magazine that really got my attention. The public information officer of the local fire rescue district had written a short piece about what to look for to protect yourself if you were thinking about getting a tattoo. As I read the article I couldn't help but think how a good laboratory professional would, of course, understand the health issues about potential skin infections and hepatitis transmission and also be able to read, understand, and interpret any local, state, or national laws that might confound the average lay tattoo artist about operating a compliant tattoo parlor.

I surfed the Web for information about standards and laws for tattoo parlors—there are plenty available. One important article underscored what I said above about performing a service to improve community health. A 2001 report from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas had some surprising findings. The researchers reported that 22% of a group of patients (who were being studied for another reason) who had one or more tattoos had evidence of hepatitis C infection. Of those who got their tattoos in a commercial parlor, 33% had hepatitis C markers. In contrast, in the rest of the study group, only 3.5% of patients with no tattoos, had hepatitis C markers. All the study participants reported no risk factors for injection-drug use or blood transfusions.

So, it seems that there's a need for the tattoo industry to ensure safer tattooing practice. Enter you—the tattoo quality consultant. You grind through a few more months of off-shifts and your tyrant supervisor while you study up on your state's laws on tattooing, attend the next tattoo convention to see if they're giving any talks on the quality side of the business, put together a little program and checklist covering the requirements, set up a home office, print some business cards, design a catchy marketing piece about how a tattoo parlor would benefit from your services, and arm yourself with a phone book and a regional map to identify your potential customers. You might, however, want to wait before investing in a Web site—until you have a few paying customers, at least.

So, what would you be looking for as a tattoo quality consultant? The article covered a number of topics that an informed consumer should notice and ask about. Following are a few.

Autoclave Sterilization and Certification

The author explained that an autoclave is essentially a pressure cooker used in the medical field for sterilizing medical instruments. She cautioned against being convinced by a non-professional tattoo artist that a kitchen-type pressure cooker for canning food is acceptable for sterilizing used tattoo

equipment—it's not. As a quality consultant, you'd check that the autoclave had been validated and certified, that there was a regular schedule for maintenance and spore testing that met manufacturer's and any legal requirements, and that there were records of maintenance and spore testing according to the schedule that demonstrated acceptable results and follow up of any unacceptable results.

Wearing of Gloves

The tattoo artist needs to wear standard medical grade protective gloves that fit properly and that are changed between customers. As a quality consultant, you can observe whether this is the case.

Vaccination for Hepatitis B

The owner of the studio should require that the artists be vaccinated for their own protection and for that of their future clients—it's good practice whether or not local or state laws require it (and some don't!). You would ask each artist if he or she is protected and for evidence of the dates.

Ointment, Inks, and Water

Anything the artist uses should be for one client only and discarded after use because of contamination with blood from repeated entry of the needles used to make the tattoo. Unused materials should never be returned to the original containers. Deodorant sticks (which help to create a darker impression of the art going on your skin before the tattooing) should be wiped on a tissue and the tissue placed on the skin. You would verify this through interview and observation.

New Sterile Needles

Ask to see the sterile indicators on the bags that contain new needles. In some states, needles can be reused if properly autoclaved. You would check this out.

OK, I've got you started on your own tattoo quality consulting service or at least what to look for if you're planning to get a tattoo. Don't worry—I won't compete with your new business; I'm much too busy running around teaching laboratories how to prepare better documents. However, if I were you, I might ask for a free sample. But only after I had verified they were meeting requirements! Let's see . . . where would I put my next tattoo?

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Caveat emptor.
[Let the buyer beware.]"

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