The psychodynamics of tattooing: a review

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The ancient art of tattooing has diverse meanings. In the South Seas archipelagos and in some Asian civilizations (India, Burma, and Japan) it has religious significance and is prized as a means of adornment. The intense pursuit of identity and autonomy that occurs during adolescence brings to the surface subconscious feelings, particularly of aggression and sexuality. These are often expressed by a rebellion against the standards of authority. A dramatic and indelible manner of expressing these conflicts is through symbols in tattooing. It is important for the pediatrician to explore the subconscious drives that govern the personality and behavior of his patients. An awareness and interpretation of what the patient is expressing through his tattoos aids in understanding the needs of the individual.

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On'y desultory attention has been paid to the ancient art of tattooing, when in fact it can be a valuable source of information concerning the subconscious drives that motivate human behavior. Pediatricians in private practice rarely encounter a tattooed child since children are under parental control and most are middle class wherein tattoos are uncommon.

While interviewing volunteers for the armed services, I found that about 10% of the males and 2% of the females were tattooed. The number of tattoos, designs, and their location offered insight into the emotional life of these young people.

A perception of the dynamics of tattooing and the significance of the skin can be valuable to pediatricians. General pediatricians are often excluded from the care of many conditions that they formerly treated because of modern technology and subspecialization. Physicians wishing to continue to specialize in pediatrics as more than just a general practitioner with an age-limited practice must become behavioral pediatricians and understand the psychological drives that affect growth and development.

History of tattooing

Tattooing has had a long and varied history and has been practiced for many different reasons. Crude needles and pigment bowls have been found in caves in France, Spain, and Portugal, suggesting that prehistoric man practiced tattooing about 8000 years ago.[1,9] Egyptian mummies, about 4000 years old, bear crude tattoos. In one of the best known biblical references, in Genesis, God placed a "mark" on the forehead of Cain after he had slain his brother Abel. Thus, God labeled Cain as an outcast and for this reason some ethnic groups have had strong religious and social prohibitions against tattooing.

Tattooing has been practiced in many different cultures throughout the world.[2,6] Since these were so widely separated by geography and communication was unlikely, tattooing probably arose spontaneously in different parts of the world in response to a need inherent in all humans. In many cultures, tattoos were symbols of protection, bravery, and love, and were perceived as an enhancement of beauty. The Ainus, also known as the Hairy Ainus, settled in Japan after a nomadic existence in Siberia and China. The Ainu females had their chins and upper lips tattooed with an imitation of hair. This seemed to be an expression of their desire for the power of men.

In early Greece, men were tattooed as a sign of nobility or bravery; but as the custom declined,

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it was done only to identify criminals or slaves. The early Romans considered the custom barbaric, and the new sect of Christians used small tattoos of religious symbols for purposes of identification. This persists in modern times such as the "pachuco mark" in gangs of delinquents and the tattooing of members of motorcycle clubs.

Tattooing was widely practiced in Polynesia, Micronesia, India, Burma, and Japan. The Polynesian word "tatau" is the stem of the English word tattoo. In Asia many religious cults encourage their adherents to be tattooed, and in Japan there is even a criminal syndicate that requires its members to be tattooed from head to foot. Japan reinstated tattooing in the 13th century after having abolished it for 200 years. In the late 18th century, tattooing became a true art form in Japan. In 1868 the Emperor Meiji outlawed the practice, although tattoo parlors remained open for practice on foreigners.

In the cultures of Western Europe and the United States, to be tattooed has never been as acceptable as in Far Eastern cultures. The Puritans of New England quoted the biblical verse, "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you." Nathaniel Hawthorne, the quintessential New England novelist, depicts Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, as being forced to wear the scarlet A upon her bosom. The Hebrews had an injunction in the Decalogue against any graven image, and for many centuries the tattoo was disdained as the mark of the undereducated, criminals, sailors, and soldiers, the demimonde.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, tattooing revived in popularity and even reached the upper classes of Europe and, to a somewhat lesser extent, high society on the eastern seaboard of the United States.[3] The impetus for this was the custom of European royal houses to send the scions of their families to serve in their navies. When their navy experience brought them in contact with Asian societies, especially in Japan, India, and Burma, it was inevitable that some of the nobility would return with tattoos. The Dukes of Clarence and York of England were tattooed in Japan. Edward VII of England, Czar Nicholas II of Russia, Queen Olga and King Constantine of Greece, King Oscar of Sweden, and many lesser members of the royal families were also tattooed. The upper classes followed the example of their rulers. Lady Randolph Churchill had a serpent tattooed on her wrist. Americans who adopted the fad patronized the tattoo artists of the Bowery or the fashionable parlors of Japan, where many of the artists were young females who moonlighted in the world's oldest profession.

Dynamics of skin and skin coverings

In observing the inductees into the Armed Services, the majority of persons tattooed were white males, a few Hispanics, Orientals, and blacks. The proprietor of a local tattoo parlor confirmed this distribution. Males prefer the arms, back, and legs and females choose the shoulder, ankle, breasts, and hips as their favorite sites, although tattoos appear on any part of the anatomy. Females often choose rosebuds, butterflies, bees (all sexual symbols), whereas males opt for fierce animals, religious symbols, mottos, and seductive female figures. Not all tattooed persons have been motivated by sexual-aggressive impulses. Some individuals believe tattoos are beautiful and enhance their appearance. Young men and boys may become tattooed on a dare and/or while slightly inebriated.

The skin is an important organ of sexual attraction and sexual arousal.[2,4] In the beginning of life, the infant perceives the world through skin contact. The neonate is placed on the abdomen of the mother or against her breasts as bonding develops. Skin contact is important in growth and development in infancy. The preschool child smears his skin with food, mud, paint, and even feces, through which he attains gratification. The need for skin contact extends throughout life, and many lonely elderly people enjoy stroking kittens and puppies.

The gamut of mental mechanisms and defenses—narcissism, masochism, sadism, inferiority feelings, omnipotence fantasies, guilt, and aggression—may be represented on the epidermis of the tattooed man.

As the child matures, clothes replace the skin as a means of expression of emotions, body image, and the developing libidinous impulses. The earliest evidence is gender identification by stereotyped dress of the sexes. Prepubertal boys often wear football or baseball uniforms, whereas girls enjoy dressing in clothes their mothers wore.

At adolescence the most striking and exotic styles of clothing appear, coinciding with the potentiation of libidinous drives. The clothing often expresses the anxieties, sexuality, and ag-

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gressive feelings common in the pubertal youngster.

In the 1960s, children in America dressed with special emphasis on sexuality. The skintight jeans became a uniform around the world. They accented the eroticism of the gluteus maximus as well as the genitalia, analogous to the codpieces of previous centuries that enhanced the genitalia. Often the more tattered, ragged, soiled, and socially unacceptable the jeans were, the more desirable they became to the rebellious teenager. Teens who conformed to traditional dress styles seemed either to have a low level of libido or to have been suppressed by parental authority.

The underlying psychosocial conflict is both an exposure and concealment of sexual aggression.[4] The child has been under the external controls of parents, community, and religion, but as an adolescent he must exert a measure of self-control over his impulses, which is possible only if he has been properly prepared for this. However, if he does not mature and instead revolts against the adult world, he may get a tattoo. The tattoo represents the youth who is unconsciously disenchanted with the socially approved substitution of garments for the original interest in the skin. The tattoo he chooses may reveal his basic psychic weakness, or conflict with aggression or sexual impulses, all at a subconscious level.

This is evident in members of motorcycle clubs or street gangs and in "pachucos" who identify themselves as delinquents through the use of distinctive tattoos.[5] These are societal outcasts who gather strength from group association and identification. Although most bikers have reached a chronological age of young adulthood, they have immature attitudes revealed in the fascination with their motorcycles, beer drinking revels, and denigration of females whom they call "my old lady."

Totemism is the motivating factor for some young men. Tattoos of lions, eagles, dragons, and other animals express the desire to thus assume some of the admirable qualities of the animal such as bravery, ferocity, and strength. Tattoos in young boys are often related to their rich fantasy life. Not only does the tattoo express unresolved oedipal feelings, but other anxieties and fears. Unclad females in seductive poses, daggers dripping with crimson blood, dragons, and snakes are commonplace designs. Religious phrases, depictions of the cross and the word "mother" are frequently seen. Some individuals have tattoos on the dorsum of the fingers, sometimes with obscene mottos.

Narcissism is an important motivation for being tattooed and is even said to have influenced a presidential election.[3] When James G. Blaine was running against Grover Cleveland for the presidency, a cartoon of Blaine (a vain man) reclining on his side in the classic pose of Narcissus appeared in the magazine *Puck*. Blaine's torso was tattooed with charges and countercharges of the campaign. This issue sold over one million copies. Cleveland won a close election, although there were other factors that contributed to the victory.

In females the motives for tattooing are often exhibitionistic. Girls use tattoos to suggest and titillate, just as they use clothes. They appear to have less need to proclaim their desires, hopes, and fears than males do. Classic Freudian symbols representing erotic zones are choice designs.

One young girl, being treated for a lymphoma, on one visit insisted on a complete examination, which revealed the words "mother, father, life, death" tattooed on her chest. In this manner she dealt with the untenable situation in which she was trapped, and the conflicts and anxieties that she could not verbalize were expressed by the tattoos.

The very act of tattooing has both heterosexual and homosexual content.[6] The penetration of the skin by a sharp needle and the injection of fluid under the skin have connotations of the sex act. Males isolated for long periods from females often tattoo one another. This is common in prisons and formerly occurred among sailors on long voyages.

Summary

The motivation for being tattooed is multifactorial. Many tattoos are acquired as a result of subconscious and repressed sexual-aggressive impulses. It is important for the physician to appreciate and understand the drives that govern the patient's behavior and affect his health. Understanding the psychodynamics of tattooing is often helpful to the perceptive physician in treating his patients.

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