



F62 Tattoos: Identifiers and Cultural Reflections

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become familiar with the changing world of tattoos and the implications for victim identification.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by drawing attention to the importance of gathering and documenting tattoo location and description of dental patients.

During the scientific session of the 2013 American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) meeting in Washington, D.C., Dr. James Schneider presented, *The History of Tattoos and Their Use as a Means of Identification*.¹ It was an effective presentation that brought to our attention the potential use of tattoos as another means of positive identification. We are all intimately aware of the importance of dental X-rays and written records in victim identification. It makes perfect sense to have tattoo information a part of the written patient chart. Consider the identification team member who happens upon a dental record that specifies the presence of a tattoo with one big heart and two small ones, with three female names inscribed within. Finding a body that exhibits such a tattoo could conceivably be faster than comparing posterior root anatomy. Traditional dental antemortem and postmortem documentation and analysis, followed by comparison, would then be done to confirm the identification. The tattoo affords the convenience of a preliminary presumption, followed by a single in-depth comparison.

Dr. Schneider's presentation was impressive and caused a behavior change back in the office. Adult patients are now queried as to whether they have any tattoos. The results are in conflict with the prejudices of the baby-boomer generation. Tattoos were often considered a form of desecration found on motorcycle gang members, veterans of the Navy, and former prisoners. The demographics have changed dramatically. Middle-age females are one of the fastest growing groups of tattooed people.

Questioning patients about their status may be viewed as indelicate. When updating their medical history, a new question is asked about any existing tattoos. People often assume that the question references hepatitis or other "dirty needle" health issues. When the identification connection is made they may smile knowingly as they are somewhat familiar with forensic principles. Care should be taken to address the subject in general terms so as not to alarm them about their own possible demise. Explosive forces and body fragmentation are issues best left unsaid, even though they have impact on the usefulness of tattoos on the extremities versus the torso.

Blood centers have also changed their protocol with respect to donors with new tattoos. Depending on the state and the associated inspection requirements, individuals with new tattoos may not have to wait 12 months before being permitted to donate blood. This information can be used to initiate a conversation and encourage patients to become blood donors.

Tattoo shops have become big business and certain museums now view some tattoos as art. There is no doubt that we will be seeing increasing numbers of patients with tattoos. As they are often custom designed and quite unique in nature, their value as aids in positive identification must be recognized.

Reference:

1. Schneider, James C. "The History of Tattoos and Their Use as a Means of Identification" Proceedings of the 65th Annual AAFS scientific session, Washington, DC.

Tattoos, Victim Identification, Dental Records