

VCF Body Piercing & Tattooing

Free tattoo removal provides fresh start

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Former gang members who want to erase reminders of their past are getting help from a surgeon who uses a laser beam to remove their tattoos for free.

Dr. Kenneth Gross is among a handful of surgeons who offer the service to help ex-gang members make a fresh start. He has helped about 1,000 tattooed young people since 1987, and his expertise is known throughout Southern California.

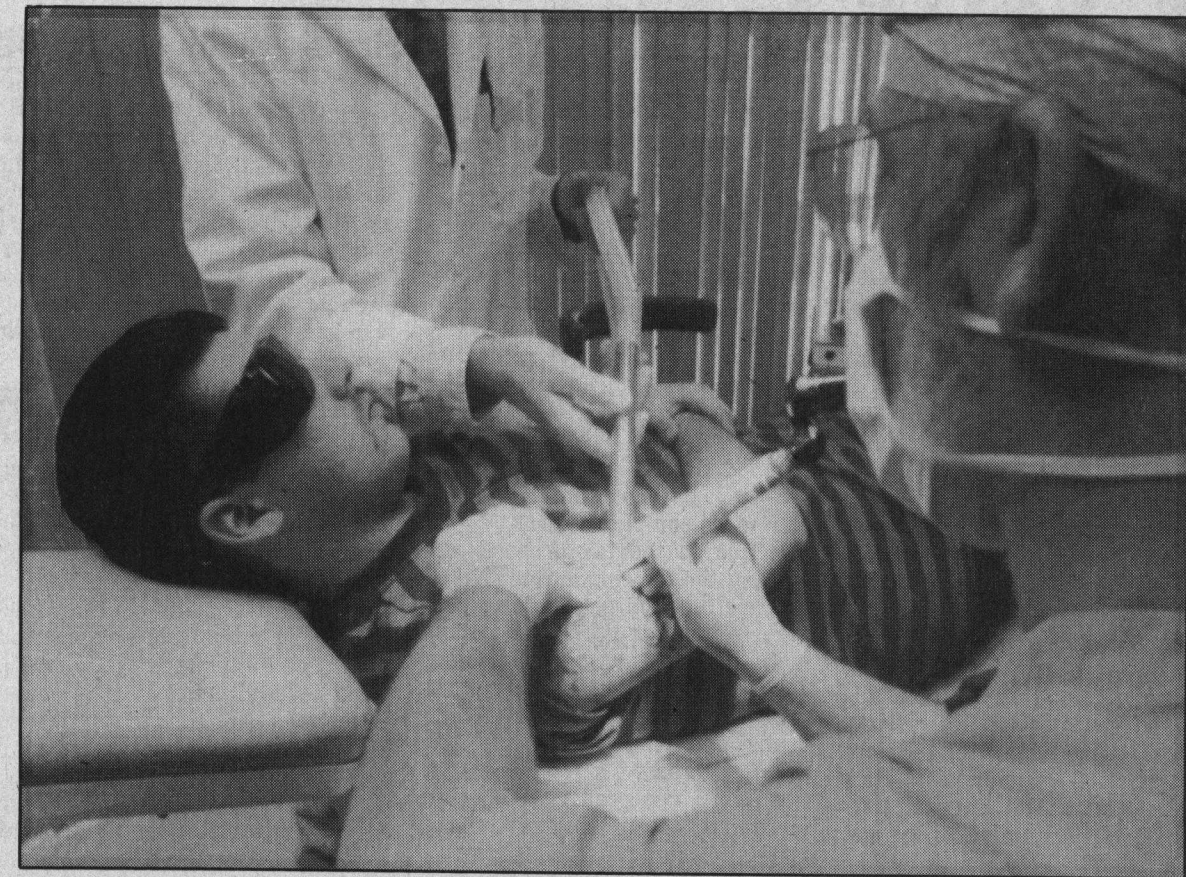
Gang members are tattooed, often many times or with large designs, to announce their allegiance. If they leave the gang, those badges become a hindrance when they seek jobs and a life away from the streets.

"If these kids become rocket scientists or doctors or lawyers, then no one will care if they have a tattoo. However, right now they are on the bottom rung," said Gross, 49.

"No one is going to hire them with gang tattoos on their hands so they can hand out burgers, then see some rumble started because a member of the opposite gang spotted the tattoo."

But losing a large tattoo can cost thousands of dollars and take several visits to a doctor. The process involves passing a laser beam quickly over the colored skin.

Marc DeAnda, 19, came to Gross to have a snarling tiger and three other large tattoos removed. It would have cost up to \$10,000 to have them erased at



Associated Press

Doctor Kenneth Gross removes gang-related tattoo from Marc DeAnda.

other clinics — money DeAnda doesn't have.

A college student, DeAnda wants to put his experiences in a West Covina gang behind him. He described it as a social club, not the kind of gang that com-

mits drive-by shootings or has underworld ties, but the tattoos still carry a stigma.

"I want them off for a clean image," said DeAnda. "It will give me a little more confidence in myself when I go into busi-

ness."

The tattoo removal is almost painless and can be done in a 15-minute office visit for a relatively small emblem. Larger ones can take several short office visits.