

# BODY ART: HOW RISKY?

Body Piercing + Tattooing  
Push for health codes  
at shops resurfaces

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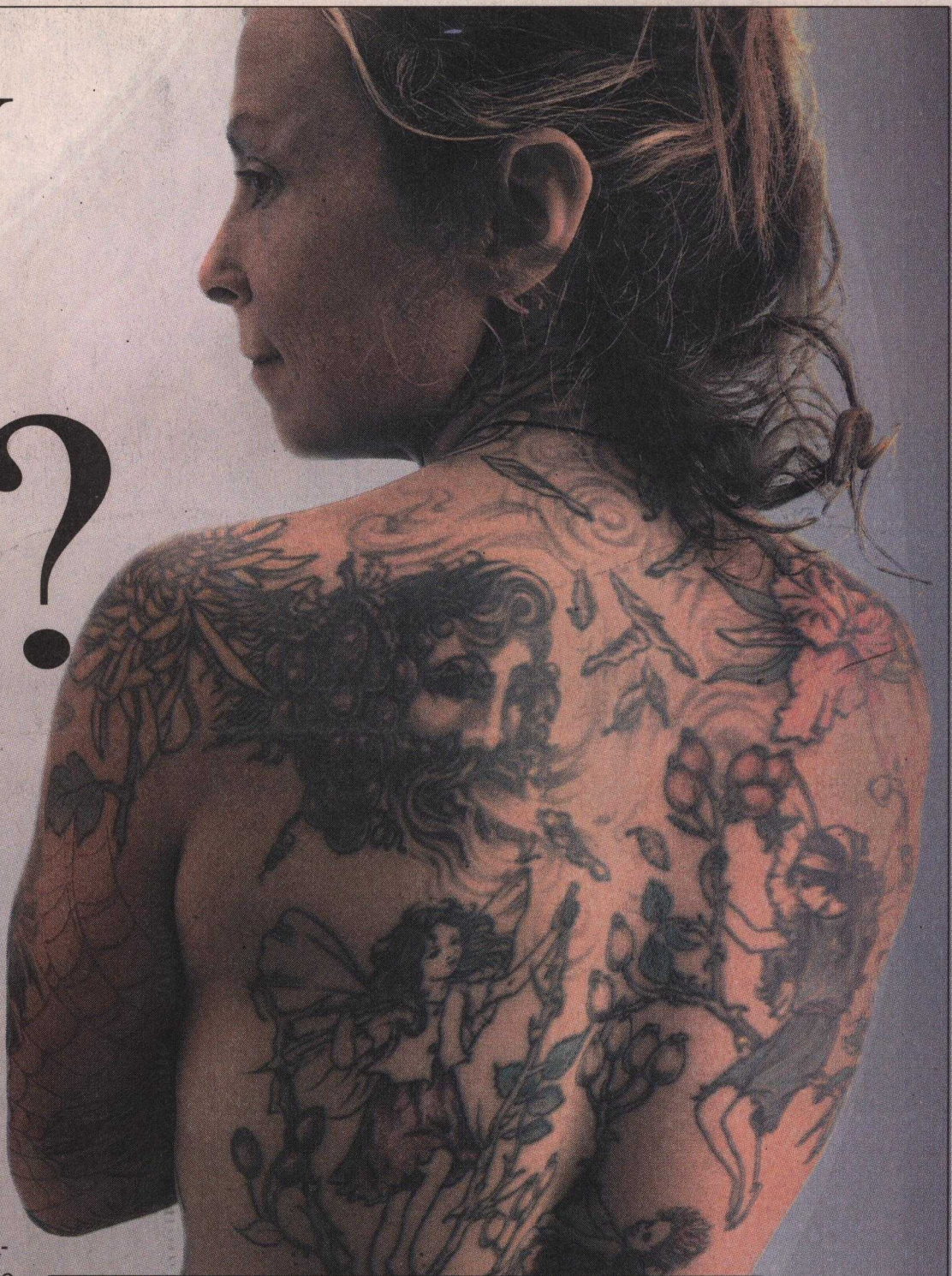
✓ SANTA CRUZ — Body piercer Jack Strobel sat in his compact, cluttered shop on Soquel Avenue, raising his eyebrows and shaking his well-gelled head of spiky platinum hair.

"I've seen some horrible piercings," said the co-owner of True Art Tattoos and Body Piercing. "The public is so naive."

It's common knowledge in the world of body art — which includes the invasive and potentially harmful procedures of piercing and tattooing — that artists aren't subject to any health or safety standards.

But some health officials are questioning the absence of standards after the Aug. 2 death of 21-year-old UC Davis student Eric Rachesky — triggered by an infected tattoo that aggravated his pre-existing heart condition.

"I was shocked," said Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Specialist Steve Schneider. "If it was my son, I wouldn't stop until something was done about it. I really think there should be



Bonnie Olson, above and left, tattoos a couple of M&Ms on a woman's ankle.

Dan Coyro/  
Sentinel  
photos



# Body art

Continued from Page A1

some standards in place."

Tattooing and body piercing are particularly popular in this area, where 17 operating shops are registered with the county and it's difficult to go a day without running into someone with full sleeves of ink or a pierced eyebrow.

Though the county Health Department cites no recent public reports of bacterial infections or blood-related disease transmission — the most common fears associated with body art — Schneider says it's only a matter of time before a problem occurs.

"Unfortunately, something tragic has to happen to get standards in place," he said.

Schneider said it's the job of the state Department of Health Services to draft health and safety standards for tattoo and piercing artists, and Rachesky's death could be the tragedy that inspires change.

However, change appears unlikely.

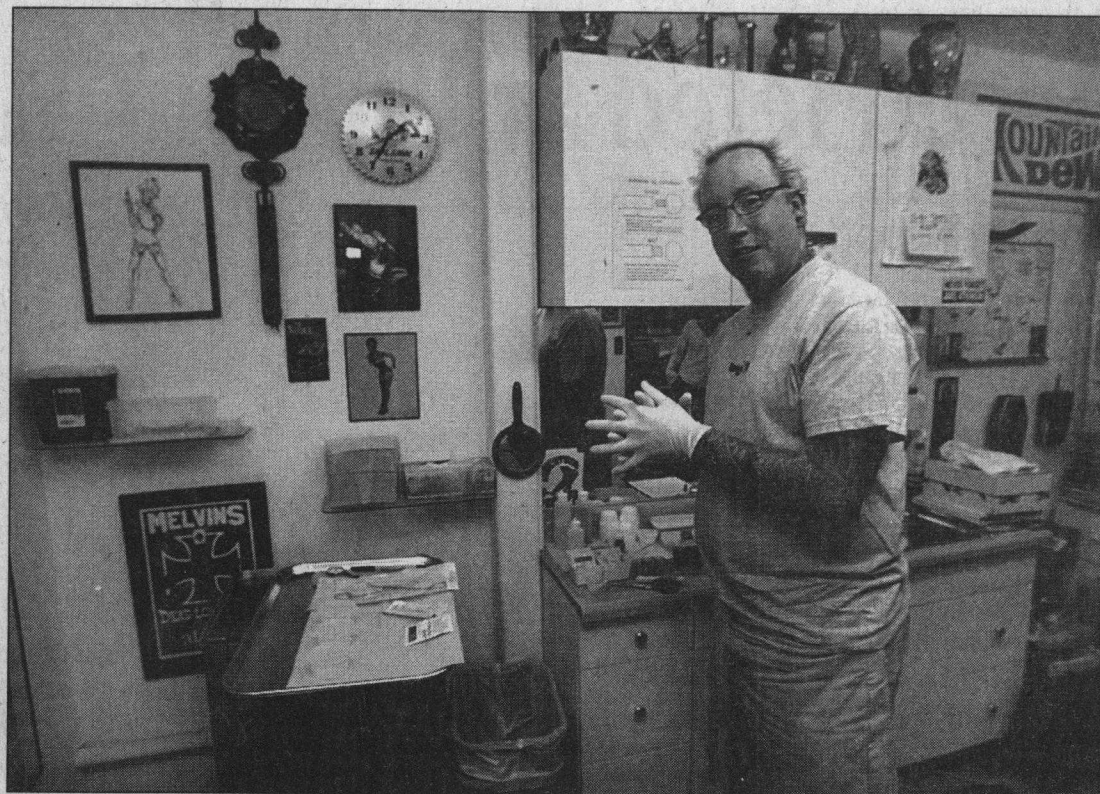
Department of Health Services spokeswoman Lea Brooks says tattoo and piercing regulations are low on the list of priorities.

"Our department is developing regulations, but the one staff member working on it has been pulled onto other more pressing projects," Brooks said — the SARS outbreak and a recent investigation of a San Francisco Bay Area phlebotomist caught recycling needles.

"Due to budget shortfalls, our staff is very limited, and in the grand scheme of things, tattooing and piercing are lower health risks," Brooks said.

Also, because many shops do a good job of regulating themselves, some artists fear government mandates would only burden their efforts.

Regardless, in 1997, Assembly



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Body-piercing specialist Jack Strobel says he fixes as many as 100 botched piercings a year.

and tattooed anyone, regardless of the person's age. The artist's only concern was that her clients paid, she said.

Worried about her own risk of picking up blood-borne pathogens, Olson left that shop to work in Blanchard's, which she said strictly adheres to self-imposed health and safety standards.

"I didn't want to walk through the shop and be afraid to answer the phone for fear of catching hepatitis," Olson said.

Complications don't happen often, she said, but exact numbers are impossible to know because of the lack of regulation and accountability.

Some of the most common problems and health risks Olson has seen are infection, allergic reaction and scarring. Transmission

outlets at the mall, did not return phone calls to discuss their methods.

Proponents of piercing guns have said they are safe because only the earring stud, not the gun, touches the skin.

The only requirement of local tattoo and piercing artists is an annual registration fee of \$105 paid to the county. It was raised this year from \$55 last year.

Shops with piercing guns are not required to register with the county at all, health specialist Schneider said. Their "single-use method," which creates a hole in the ear with an earring stud, is deemed safe and commonplace.

But most local artists and the piercing association agree that minimum safety requirements should entail the use of an auto-

state's inaction.

Monterey County is drafting an ordinance that would require a permit, permit fee, inspections and health and safety standards.

"We've been waiting on the state but we want to be more proactive," said Jon Jennings, Monterey County Health Department's hazardous and solid waste officer. "There is a need. We've been contacted by many artists who want to know what they have to do. They want to do the right thing."

In Nevada, the Washoe County District Board of Health requires all body artists to secure a permit before performing any invasive procedures.

To get a permit, artists must have: an autoclave on premises, a sink with running hot and cold water, latex gloves, washable floors, walls and ceilings, adequate

## Body art basics

■ One in every seven U.S. adults has a tattoo.

■ Minors cannot legally get a tattoo in California. Body piercing requires parental consent.

■ Santa Cruz County has 17 registered tattoo and piercing shops. (This does not include jewelry outlets that use only piercing guns.)

■ People pay about \$100 an hour for tattoo work in Santa Cruz. A small flower may cost \$50, while more intricate art can cost thousands.

■ While some jewelry shops offer free ear piercings, piercings cost an average of \$50-\$70, with navel piercing usually most expensive. The jewelry can cost thousands.

■ The biggest health concerns are bacterial infection and blood-related disease transmission, particularly hepatitis. Any procedure that involves contact with blood or body fluids requires strict adherence to cross-contamination prevention.

■ The lack of regulation makes incidence of infection or other complications difficult to know.

■ Many states outlawed tattooing after a 1961 outbreak of hepatitis, but most prohibitions have been lifted.

*SOURCES: Scripps Howard News Service, county Environmental Health, local body artists.*

"It's a double-edged sword," said van den Berghe, whose body is 60 percent covered with tattoos. "As soon as you open the door to regulation, you open it to regulation that might not be fair."

"You'd be dealing with many bureaucrats who at their core tend to be conservative, narrow-minded people, and you're letting them tell you what you can and cannot do," he said. "I think the only way to get good, sensible regulations is to involve the artists themselves. It's already a self-regulated cul-

## What to watch out for

Inherent to tattoo and body-piercing procedures is the potential for infection and disease transmission. With that in mind, local practitioners and fans of body art have some safety advice to offer.

**Tod Almighty**, who has been piercing for 14 years and has taught Fakir Intensives body-art seminars, says:

■ Don't go to practitioners who recommend using alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, antibiotic ointment, iodine or other cleansing agents on your piercing. Only edible sea salt dissolved in water and saline solution should be used.

■ Never get pierced with a piercing gun — they cannot be sterilized in autoclaves.

**Barry Blanchard**, owner of Staircase Tattoo and Piercing, has taught classes for Professional Piercing Information Systems. He says:

■ Never take advice about how to heal a tattoo from friends — only from professional artists.

■ Avoid tattoo and piercing shops that recycle needles, that don't use latex gloves and don't have an enclosed biohazard area or easily cleaned floors and walls.

**Lex van den Berghe**, hepatitis and HIV prevention advocate and 'avid collector' of body art, has released 'Lex's Guide to Tattoo and Body Piercing Safety.' His guide recommends:

■ Tattoo artists and piercers should have an autoclave at their shop. They should sterilize equipment after each customer.

■ Artists should always use new needles. A safe tattooist or piercer should open the package in front of you.

■ Artists should wash their hands and put on a new pair of latex gloves.

■ Shops should put new ink into a disposable container for each



Some artists fear health department mandates would only burden their efforts.

Regardless, in 1997, Assembly Bill 186 recommended that state and county health departments develop health and safety standards and require tattoo and piercing practitioners to register with county health departments.

Shops do have to register in Santa Cruz County, but neither the state nor county has moved on implementing health and safety standards.

Barry Blanchard, owner of Staircase Tattoo and Piercing on Ocean Street, said infections like the one Rachesky contracted in Davis are often caused by clients failing to care for their piercings or tattoos after they leave the shop.

Standards — including requiring shops to provide adequate after-care information to customers — would be a step in the right direction toward preventing similar deaths, he said.

Doctors have confirmed Rachesky did not take his prescribed antibiotics before the tattoo work, which likely would have prevented his fatal reaction to the infection.

Blanchard said signs posted at shops warning people prone to infection to take antibiotics before invasive procedures "isn't a bad idea."

But, he said, that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to standards that should have been in place years ago.

## What's at stake

Tattooing and body piercing are linked not only by their appeal to similar clientele, but by their use of needles, blood exposure and potential for infection or disease transmission from unsanitary conditions.

"It's like milk and cookies," said longtime Santa Cruz piercer Tod Almighty. "Most people who are pierced are tattooed."

Some artists take advantage of this longstanding trend, putting cash before safety, said Bonnie Olson, a local tattoo artist covered with an intricate array of tattoos.

Upon arriving in Santa Cruz five years ago, she said, she worked for a local artist she refused to name who didn't sterilize her needles, cross-contaminated everything

Some of the most common problems and health risks Olson has seen are infection, allergic reaction and scarring. Transmission of diseases like hepatitis is far less common.

Strobel, of True Art, said infections are caused by piercings, too — and some potential complications are painful keloid scarring, earlobe stretching, breaking and worse.

He fixes so many botched piercings — estimated at more than 100 per year from head shops and mall kiosks — that he keeps a big glass jar labeled "Crap" on a shelf by his purple-padded piercing table.

The jar holds relatively cheap and pus-laced jewelry he pulled from clients' infected bellybuttons, noses and nipples.

## The absence of rules

The infections come as no surprise, Strobel said.

Anybody with a hankering to make a quick buck can set up shop at a street fair or the back of a retail clothing shop, with no consideration for such basic practices as hand washing or sterilization.

"Some of these places don't even have sinks and they use (piercing) guns," he said.

Piercing guns have been criticized by such groups as the Georgia-based Association of Professional Piercers, which alleges that gun sterilization is insufficient. The guns can't be sterilized with the industry-preferred autoclave, a device similar to a pressure cooker that uses steam to kill bacteria and spores.

The association maintains that only sterile disposable equipment such as pre-packaged needles are suitable for safe piercing.

"Blood can aerosolize (become airborne in microscopic particles) and contaminate the gun," the association's official statement says. "If any part of the stud touches any part of the contaminated gun, there is the possibility of transmitting a disease-causing micro organism ... like the hepatitis virus."

Some shops in Santa Cruz County use piercing guns, including at least two at the Capitola Mall.

Employees and corporate offices of both Claire's Accessories and the Piercing Pagoda, who have

But most local artists and the piercing association agree that minimum safety requirements should entail the use of an autoclave, new needles, new jewelry, latex gloves, hand-washing and new disposable razors for shaving skin.

Tattoo and piercing artists generally agree that artists should also put new ink into a disposable container for each client, and use edible sea salt dissolved in water and saline solution for after-care of piercings, not alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, antibiotic ointment or other cleansing agents.

## The push for standards

County health departments, Schneider said, are waiting on the state to create and distribute standards.

"Local agencies don't want to go out and enforce a draft of standards. What if they changed?" he said.

Blanchard, of Staircase Tattoo and Piercing, has been trying to work with the state Department of Health to implement standards ever since AB 186 recommended developing standards.

He wants regulations requiring artists to use new tattooing and piercing needles with every client; the use of autoclaves to sterilize needles and body jewelry; secluded biohazard rooms; seamless, easily cleaned and disinfected floors and walls; proper client screening; sound after-care recommendations given to clients; and strict enforcement of the state-mandated 18-and-over age limit.

Experienced body artists say these requirements, if enforced, will drastically reduce the risk of blood-borne diseases like hepatitis for clients and artists and reduce the number of unhappy customers.

"We want to get rid of the scratchers out there — the guys who just came into a little money and want to open a shop with no experience," said tattoo artist Aaron Cooper, who works with Blanchard.

Blanchard, however, concedes his efforts to win statewide standards aren't likely to go anywhere soon, given other state issues.

Some counties, though, have begun to draft and enforce their own standards, regardless of the

permitted. To get a permit, artists must have: an autoclave on premises, a sink with running hot and cold water, latex gloves, washable floors, walls and ceilings, adequate working space, single use and disposable needles, and must sterilize all non-disposable instruments.

Other states have drafted enforceable standards for tattoo and piercing artists.

In Oregon, the state inspects shops twice a year to ensure that standards — from needle sterilization to floor cleaning — are being met, and some officials there say California is missing the boat.

"We have extensive regulations," said Ben Rodriguez, communications officer with the Oregon Health Licensing Office in Salem.

In the meantime, people injured or disfigured by inexperienced or unscrupulous — but registered — tattooists and piercers in Santa Cruz County have few places to turn for help.

Schneider said people with complaints about tattoo and piercing shops can call the state Department of Consumer Affairs, but representatives there said they can do nothing without laws to back them up.

"Tattoo parlors should be regulated by local health departments," said Rick Lopes, information officer with the Department of Consumer Affairs and liaison to the state Legislature. "We don't have any administrative authority. We regulate things when there are regulations in place."

Lopes said no change is in sight. "I have not heard people talking about any legislation coming down the pike," he said.

Strobel, at True Art, agrees regulations are needed, but said that if standards are eventually implemented, he doesn't want the government to go overboard.

"For piercing, I think registering and being required to have an autoclave is necessary," he said. "But some OSHA (Occupational Health and Safety Administration) guidelines are too much. I don't want to have to line my walls with plastic and wash them down after every client."

Lex van den Berghe, a local supporter of hepatitis and HIV prevention efforts who just released a guide to body-art safety, is also wary of overzealous regulation.

ed people, and you're letting them tell you what you can and cannot do," he said. "I think the only way to get good, sensible regulations is to involve the artists themselves. It's already a self-regulated culture."

The parents of Rachesky, who died earlier this month, are lobbying for a bill that would force tattoo artists to display signs warning that people with heart conditions similar to their son's may need to take antibiotics before getting a tattoo.

In the absence of legislation, Blanchard said, most decent shops will continue imposing their own, strict regulations.

"When your whole reputation is based on word of mouth, it's important you do the right thing," he said strolling through his studio, pointing out his clean, seamless floors, biohazard room, expensive autoclaves and latex gloves.

"It's also a moral obligation."

Contact Robyn Moormeister at [rmoormeister@santa-cruz.com](mailto:rmoormeister@santa-cruz.com).

■ Artists should wash their hands and put on a new pair of latex gloves.

■ Shops should put new ink into a disposable container for each customer. Blood can easily contaminate the inks.

■ Artists should use new, disposable razors for shaving skin.

■ Shops should be willing to discuss safety precautions with you.

■ "Don't get a tattoo if you or the artist are drunk or high. ... You'll both be more aware of safety if you're sober."