



Patrick Conlon paints a tattoo at East Side Ink, which was fined for allowing pop star Rihanna to wield the needle.

Scarred by the sting of ink

BY PETE CATAPANO
November 13-15, 2009

Tattoo trade is the 'Wild West' with few rules

When Tony Ritter got a tattoo at 20, he didn't realize that the little bulldog emblazoned on his right shoulder blade would come back to bite him 15 years later.

What should have been a 90-minute procedure stretched into three hours of agony. It felt like the Nevada tattoo artist was grinding the needle into his bone, he recalled.

"I almost cried because it hurt so bad," said Ritter, now 35. "When it was healing, it oozed a lot of the ink."



Tony Ritter's tattoo still gets inflamed after 15 years.

Even though the tattoo looks normal, it's essentially raised scar tissue that still gets inflamed, said Ritter, who lives in Colorado. He doesn't know if the artist was licensed, but stories such as his are a reminder that people should make sure the person inking them is certified and safe.

Little oversight

Rodrigo Melo, artist/owner of North Star Tattoo in the East Village, pays \$100 a year for his license, but he said: "The health department doesn't do any regulation on us at all. ... I've been working in the city for 10 years and I've never seen one person come in to check."

The city health department — which licenses artists, not shops — refused repeated requests to comment or to provide the number of violations it has issued. As of Sept. 23, however, there were 25 complaints about tattoo artists to the city's 311 hotline, bringing the five-year total to 80.

While that doesn't seem like a large number, some in the industry said many wronged patrons aren't likely to complain. And Dr. Roy Geronemus, director of the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New

York, noted that there has been a spike in the number of people getting bad tattoos removed.

"[There's] more and more botched jobs. Basically it's the Wild West, there's no control or enforcement of regulations," he said.

'Badge of trust'

Dr. Ariel Ostad, of NYU Medical Center, said unlicensed artists might share needles and not sterilize equipment, which can result in clients contracting hepatitis C, HIV or bacterial infections.

"The license is a badge of trust," said Maia Ramnath, 36, a tattooed East Villager. "If it's there, you can trust things are clean and sanitary."

But Mark Haraela, an artist at East Side Ink, which was fined last July for allowing pop singer Rihanna to tattoo other artists in the East Village shop, disagreed. "A lot of places don't have licenses, so I wouldn't want to make people paranoid about a little piece of paper just to make sure they're an OK tattoo artist," he said.

Jen, a co-owner of East Side Ink who declined to give her last name, offered this advice: "Trust your instincts when you go into the shop. If it feels clean, looks clean, and you get a good vibe from the artist and the people who work there, then it's good. If it looks dirty and seems off, it probably is."



Phoebe Kingsak contributed to this story.

ARIEL OSTAD, MD • COSMETIC, LASER AND DERMATOLOGIC SURGERY

897 Lexington Avenue • New York, NY 10065 • Tel: 212.517.7900 • www.drarielostad.com

Listed in the Castle Connolly Guide to the Best Doctors in the NY Metro Area