Both Sides

Three R.T.s Debate a Hot Issue

Are Tattoos and Body Piercings Acceptable in the Workplace?

YES. Judge My Skills, Not My Skin!

BY REBECCA KEITH, B.S., R.T.(R)

I HAVE BEEN a registered radiologic technologist for 10 years and a full-time educator in diagnostic imaging for more than four years. I am always highly concerned about and show care for my patients, and I exhibit skill and attention to detail when taking a radiograph or performing a CT procedure. I sound like an excellent candidate for a job, right? Would you think the same if you knew that I have more than 10 tattoos?

I believe that body art, such as tattoos and piercings, is a type of self-expression and an art form. Individuals from every walk of life have them, and health care professionals are no exception. I think that a person has a right to self-expression, including the display of body art, just as one has a right to wear their favorite color scrubs, dye their hair a different color, paint fingernails a certain shade or modify their appearance with plastic surgery. A tattoo on someone's arm does not brand him or her as unfit for imaging or treating patients.

There is a stereotype that tattoos and piercings are the special domain of miscreants and criminals. Why are people fearful of folks with tattoos? Tattoos are increasingly a part of our culture and global society, and have been for thousands of years. Inked individuals have many different reasons for deciding on a tattoo: to articulate a feeling, to commemorate a personal experience, to express their spiritual or religious ideals or simply to take pleasure in a contemporary art form. Tattoos are not a passing trend or indicative of unethical behavior. Aficionados view tattoos as an enduring investment in artwork and plan each tattoo well in advance, seeking out a specific theme, tradition or school of tattooing and, many times, a specific tattooer.

Tattoo and piercing studios undergo thorough accreditation and certification processes (mandated by law in my state) to verify that they are following certain cleanliness guidelines, such as strict autoclave sterilization procedures and the use of single-use disposable needles. Everyone in the professional tattoo community is trained and well aware of the ease of transmission of blood-borne pathogens. It is important to their businesses and livelihood to keep their clients, as well as themselves, safe and happy.

In addition, proper care needs to be given to a recent tattoo or piercing so that it does not become infected and stays true to the original color and design. Health care workers are especially aware of this, as we do not want to expose ourselves or our patients to any unhygienic materials.

I have never had a negative comment from a patient because of my tattoos. I have, however, had patients divulge more information about their history or injury because they feel less intimidated or scrutinized. I’ve also had several patients ask to see my tattoos, ask about my tattooer or remark positively about my tattoos’ designs or colors.

We are taught never to judge, demean or mistreat our patients based on their appearance, and I believe that we should have the same respect for our colleagues who have various forms of body art.

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NO. Displays of Individuality Are Out of Bounds in Health Care

BY ELIZABETH J. GREER, M.ED., R.T.(R), AND GORDON WEIMER, M.B.A., R.T.(R)

ELIZABETH: As educators in the radiologic sciences, we prepare students to competently perform imaging exams. We also introduce them to professional practice and the teamwork approach to patient care. When students enter the radiologic science program at the University of New Mexico, we teach them early on that as a team member you must blend in and meet the goals and standards set by the institutions you will be affiliated with in the clinical setting and the classroom.

With this in mind, demonstrating one’s individuality through the display of tattoos and piercings only sets the technologist off from the rest of the team, which includes not only other radiographers but nurses, physicians and other health care providers at all levels of patient care. It is important to allow individuals to express their identity, but in our profession this individuality can be a distraction to patients and coworkers. When piercings and tattoos are excessive, it also raises concerns about proper hygiene and patient safety.

As much as one-fourth to one-half of the current work force has tattoos and piercings, so educators in the radiologic sciences need to set strict policies that are both socially acceptable and meet the standards of the institutions our students represent.

GORDON: Setting an image and upholding a standard are key elements of a successful business relationship. How does a dress code apply? Simple: Dress codes set the public appearance for what the company represents. For better or worse, employees reflect on their employers. In health care, we serve the needs of people at their most vulnerable moments, so we must rise to the level of professionalism that all patients demand. We provide compassionate care in a safe, clean, friendly environment. If a member of the health care team intimidates a patient or causes the patient to stare in disbelief, then that employee has become a distraction from the health care mission.

In the radiographer’s role in particular we have only a few minutes to make a good first impression, gain a patient’s confidence and provide a quality exam. We know from satisfaction surveys that we are remembered from our few minutes of contact with patients, whether for good or ill. We are either “the one who made me move my broken arm” or the one who, “even with a full waiting room, took the time to be kind and compassionate.” It’s hard and shouldn’t be necessary to follow up on comments like, “The tech with all those piercings scared me.” I have even had to visit with patients because they thought an employee with tattoos wasn’t clean and, therefore, the whole area might not be sanitary. (Granted, this is just one patient’s perception.)

Enforcing a dress code policy is a never-ending challenge. As times change, so do our standards and expectations. (First it was too many earrings, now it’s full-body tattoos and significant body-modification piercings.) Remember what we are all trying to project and produce, from the CEO to the part-time patient sitter: a highly educated, technologically advanced, safe, clean, friendly, compassionate health care team. Individual statements aren’t part of a team commitment.

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SIDE NOTE

If you’d like to contribute to this debate, send your e-mail to scanner@asrt.org.