

A laser is shined on tattoo removal

More shops offer the service, but doctors question qualifications.

By Ryan Holeywell
USA TODAY

For 10 years, tattoo artist Steve Huntsberry has worked at his shop in Charlotte, removing tattoos with a laser and coming face to face every day with his customers' greatest regrets. He has removed more tattoos than he can count, but there are some he'll never forget.

Like the guy who had a pair of eyes tattooed on a private part of his body.

"He decided he didn't want those any more," says Huntsberry, 33. "I felt for him. I really did."

Empathy for those who seek tattoo removal — and his own experience regretting bad tattoos — is what led Huntsberry to offer tattoo removal services within his own tattoo shop, named, ironically enough, Immortal Images.

"We all make bad decisions sometimes," Huntsberry says, sheepishly admitting that his first tattoo — a Grim Reaper he got on his left arm at age 15 — was also among the first to be removed. "I understand what it is like having a bad tattoo, having something you don't want to look at every day."

For years, dermatologists had been removing tattoos from customers using dermabrasion tools that essentially sanded off tattoos, or caustic salt solutions that burned the skin. But since 1986, they have used a tool called a q-switched laser that rarely leaves scars or damage but requires multiple, painful treatments that can end up costing thousands. Now, more and more tattoo artists like Huntsberry are offering the laser service themselves, generally at a lower cost, but setting off debate in the process.

Some dermatologists and medical groups say the work is safe only when done by a physician in a doctor's office; tattoo artists argue they know how skin, tattoo pigments and lasers interact and can provide an environment where their tattooed customers feel comfortable.



Laser precision: Technician Gina Babyak removes tattoos from Eternal Tattoos owner Terry Welker's arm at his shop in Howell, Mich., where each session costs \$150.

Painful but popular procedure

There are few national figures on annual tattoo removal, but a survey conducted in 2004 and reported in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* found 24% of Americans ages 18 to 50 had tattoos, and of those, 17% were considering having them removed.

Tattoo removal has been robust business for Huntsberry, who eliminates 20 to 30 tattoos each week. Immortal Images makes more money on removals than on the tattoo work of all four of its artists combined, Huntsberry says.

He says he strives to be honest with his customers about the procedure, which can result in second-degree burns with swelling, blistering and the possibility of infection.

Alan Dixon, who has been offering laser removal at his tattoo business in Destin, Fla., for 2½ years, says about half of his customers have a tattoo removed or lightened just so they can get a better design put in its place.

Terry Welker, who owns five Eternal Tattoos shops outside Detroit, has offered tattoo removal at one shop for three years. He says his prices are \$150 a session — removal usually requires at least three sessions — while doctors in the area charge \$300-\$500 a session.

David Goldberg, a dermatologist and lawyer in New York, says his practice charges \$400 to \$1,000 a session, and the procedure is almost never covered by insurance.

Tattoo removal can be a long process

Removing a tattoo with a laser can take anywhere from five to 15 treatments. With variables such as the pigments' depth and density, there is no guarantee of complete removal. Doctors say this is how the procedure is done:

Some patients may request cream or injected anesthesia to numb pain.

1 Pulses of light break up color pigments in the skin.



2 A crust forms over the tattoo, which lasts about two weeks.



3 The immune system removes the pigment particles through a process in which white blood cells surround and engulf foreign bodies



4 Six to eight weeks must pass between sessions to permit the skin to heal and the tattoo ink to be eliminated.

Sources: [David Goldberg](#) and "Effective Tattoo Removal Treatments," *Skin & Aging*, October 2005

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

"A lot of people can't afford that," Welker says.

In February, Welker's shop started laser removal of a tattoo on the arm of Mike Battaglia, 23. Although the pain was "absolutely horrible," Battaglia says, he was pleased with the service.

"They're around it every day," he says. "They know what they're doing with it."

But [Goldberg](#) and other dermatologists aren't so sure. Tattoo artists might charge less for laser removal than dermatologists, they say, but what about the quality and safety of the service?

Though complications are rare in experienced hands, proper laser tattoo removal requires using the correct type of laser, understanding the reaction of tissue to laser and knowing how to treat the area after the procedure, says Roy Geronemus, a former president of the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, in an e-mail.

"Clearly, tattoo artists are not qualified or trained to practice medicine," Geronemus says. "Not a week goes by where I don't see complications from tattoo removal by unqualified individuals."

Regulation in states' hands

The legal questions surrounding who can perform laser tattoo removal are complicated as well, because no national standard exists. The Food and Drug Administration does not regulate who can buy and use tattoo lasers, leaving it up to the states instead.

[Goldberg](#) says some states allow only doctors to operate tattoo lasers, others require varying degrees of doctor supervision, and some don't regulate laser procedures at all.

State medical boards in North Carolina, Michigan and Florida, for instance, all consider someone performing laser tattoo removal to be practicing medicine. They say the only people who can perform the procedure legally are physicians or people working under a physician's supervision.

But state health officials in Michigan and Florida say that position is based on the boards' interpretation of the law and that there are no laws or statutes in these states that specifically say laser tattoo removal is a medical procedure.

They also say those most likely to face potential legal action are those operating facilities in which someone has been injured.

Welker, who operates in Michigan, says the person who performs laser removal at his shop is a registered nurse. He says before he began offering the service, he contacted both the state and county health departments — he recommends others entering the field do the same — and received no indication that he couldn't offer laser tattoo removal.

Whoever performs the service, tattoo removal is likely to become more popular as baby boomers tire of the names and pictures they had put on their skin in their younger days. For many, Huntsberry says, even though removing a tattoo can take months, it's well worth it.

"It's like wearing a ball and chain for God knows how many years," he says. "And (then) just having it taken off, getting that monkey off your back. ... It is definitely a good feeling."

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Tattoo removal can be painful and expensive, so experts say consumers should think carefully about the procedure and educate themselves before going under the laser.

The process

Ask how much experience the laser operator has, and ask the person to explain the process in detail. "Make sure the person doing the treatment really understands exactly what's happening and how it works," says Steve Huntsberry, owner of the Immortal Images tattoo shop in Charlotte.

The portfolio

Ask to see a portfolio of the laser operator's work. Make sure that before-and-after photos aren't stock images but actual photos of the laser operator's patients.

The response

Consider how your tattoos will respond to the treatment, says [David Goldberg](#), a dermatologist and lawyer in New York. Amateur tattoos come off more quickly and completely than do professional tattoos, and blue, black, red and green colors respond best. Yellow tattoos don't respond to laser removal treatment, and white tattoos can become darker. Patients should have realistic expectations and know that multiple laser treatments will be required, [Goldberg](#) says.

The lasers

Different lasers are required for different colors of ink, so make sure the proper lasers are being used, says Roy Geronemus, a New York dermatologist and former president of the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. For instance, green tattoos can only be laser removed by devices called q-switched ruby or q-switched alexandrite lasers; red tattoos, with q-switched neodymium-yag lasers.

The makeup look

Cosmetic tattoos, tattoos that serve as a permanent application of makeup, require special types of lasers and significant skill to remove. If you have those types of tattoos, make sure the laser operator is experienced in that area.

The skin types

Darker skin can pose challenges to laser operators because the increased pigmentation of the skin competes with the pigment of the tattoos. People who are Asian, Hispanic or black should ask about the laser operator's experience working with people of darker skin types. Avoid tanning before undergoing laser tattoo removal, Geronemus says.

For more information on laser tattoo removal as well as other procedures, visit www.skinandlasers.com