

BOOK REVIEWS

Current Problems in Dermatology, Vol. 48. Tattooed Skin and Health by J. Serup, N. Kluger, W. Bäumlner. ISBN: 978-3-318-02776-1. Hard cover. 268 pages, 110 illustrations (85 in colour), Price: CHF 197.00/EUR 164.00. Basel: Karger Publishers, 2015.

Many imagine that tattooing is an event that happens after an alcohol-influenced sudden decision, which may be carried out in the back-room of a small basement apartment by a tattooist with unknown qualifications. This book shows that this idea is totally wrong. It reveals the complexity of tattooing; in 35 chapters, 27 of which are written by tattooists, chemists or legislative affairs personnel, the process is explained in detail.

This reviewer does not like tattoos. However, his daughter has some discrete tattoos. She is from the generation of mid-1970s and 80s, amongst which tattooing has boomed. Is this because of David Beckham? No, it is more complex than that. My favourite chapter in this book is by Nicolas Kluger, dermatologist, who writes about the epidemiology of tattoos in industrialized countries. I am impressed by the chemical complexity of tattoo inks, as exemplified in chapters by Ralf Michel and Michael Dirks. There is a lot of high-level chemistry included in this book.

Are tattoos dangerous? They can be, but considering that approximately 100 million Europeans have tattoos, the adverse events are not that common, but are troublesome for the affected. From 5% to 15% of people regret their tattoos.

As a young resident at the Finsen Institute in Copenhagen I once examined a lady with a skin disease whose diagnosis I have forgotten, but on her left lower arm I noticed a number in a blue tattoo. I immediately realized that she had been in a concentration camp. She told me she had worked as secretary in Joseph Mengele's office in Auschwitz. It was probably only because her work was so valuable that she had survived. She declined any further discussion with me, leaving me with an understanding of the pain she was carrying in her life.

Can tattoos be helpful? This is a true story: A young white American man was due to present for military service during the Vietnam War. He had a tattoo made on the lateral aspect of his right hand, so that each time he saluted, the recipient of his salute could read: Fuck the Army. He was not drafted and didn't go to Vietnam.

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