Tattoo Designs Among Drug Abusers

Alexander Borokhov, MD, Roland Bastiaans, MD, and Vladimir Lerner, MD, PhD

Division of Psychiatry, Ministry of Health Mental Health Center, Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, Israel

Abstract: Forty-one males with drug abuse who had tattoos with designs related to drug use were selected from a larger sample of tattooed males in forensic psychiatric wards, prisons and military recruitment centers during the period 1986-2000 in the former Soviet Union. Two-thirds of the tattoo images were related to a specific drug, some served to hide signs of repeated drug use, others to identify ideal sites for injection. Knowledge of these details may be helpful to clinicians, although images may be influenced by current trends.

The word “tattoo” entered the English language as an Anglicized version of the Tahitian word “tatau” (“to mark”). Tattooing is conscious injuring of the skin by special tools, which inject color in the skin with the purpose of obtaining permanent, indelible images. On the one hand, tattooing thrived throughout antiquity in China, Japan and North Africa, and tattoos have been found on skins of Egyptian mummies dating from 4000 to 2000 B.C.E. On the other hand, tattooing has been condemned by several religions. For example in Leviticus 19:28, God spoke to Moses, prohibiting tattooing as idolatry: “You shall not make any cutting in your flesh nor imprint any marks on you.” The Prophet Mohammed issued a similar injunction in the Koran as did Pope Adrian I at the Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787 (1, 2).

The original aim of the tattoo was to serve as a nonverbal symbol for personal identification and for making one’s status clear among the other members of society.

In modern society tattoo has some additional meanings. For example, tattoos may express individualism, defiance, affection, risk-taking, sexual preference, beauty, fantasies, freedom, etc. (3-5). For many young individuals the tattoo is a quest for identity through which he/she is able to make clear to the world who he/she is, with the expectation of being accepted as such. The tattoo has also a major function in proclaiming one’s allegiance to a specific group or subculture with its own intrinsic rules, but at the same time it stresses difference from other groups. Hence, the tattoo itself and its meaning may reflect the inner world of an individual and his/her relationship with the outside world (6, 7). Moreover, according to some authors, the high rate of tattoo found among drug abusers may reflect their lack of social adaptability as well as an obstacle to the process of rehabilitation (8).

In spite of the abundant literature on tattoo (historical, ethnographical and cosmetic aspects, technique, and the art of tattooing itself), there are few medical studies on this topic. Most medical investigations concerning tattoos are devoted to personal hygiene, infectious diseases (hepatitis C and HIV) and to dermatological problems inherent to tattoo-drawing itself (9-12). Since tattooing in jail or prison is generally performed by using non-sterile improvised “prickers” such as nails, needles, syringe needles, guitar strings and so on, it is not surprising that this practice increases the risk of infection (13). As mentioned above, psychiatric reports on tattoos and their relationship to mental disturbances are rare and, if at all, they are usually related to antisocial personality (14, 15).

The current study is to our knowledge the first report which makes an attempt to describe different images concerned with drug use.

The aim of our study was to investigate tattoos and describe their locations as found on the bodies of substance abusers and to find a possible relationship between these images and abuse or dependence on various kinds of drugs.

Address for Correspondence: Vladimir Lerner, MD, PhD, Beersheba Mental Health Center, POB 4600, Beersheba, 84170, Israel. E-mail: lernervld@yahoo.com
Subjects and Methods

During the period 1986-2000 we examined 1,440 subjects in Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the Ukraine. The examination was carried out in five forensic psychiatric wards, three prisons and two military recruitment centers: 318 prisoners, 255 psychiatric inpatients and 867 conscripts. Among all the examined subjects, 351 persons had 787 tattoos: 236 (74.2%) were prisoners, 46 (18.3%) psychiatric inpatients and 69 (7.9%) were conscripts.

In accordance with their meaning all images are divided into criminal, non-criminal or combined tattoos. Criminal tattoos are defined as those images which reflected conflict with the law (criminal violations, number of years served in prison), using covert or obvious symbols, and/or demonstrated rank in a criminal hierarchy. These images are drawn on the skin either voluntarily or forcibly. Non-criminal tattoos are characterized by absence of content regarding conflict with the law and reflect the individual worldview of the subject; they have usually been voluntarily acquired. Combined tattoos include images from both of the above groups (16, 17). Each group includes several subgroups reflecting various differences in meaning. The full classification of tattoos has been reported in previous publications (1, 16).

According to the purpose of the study only tattooed persons who suffered from substance abuse or dependence (according to DSM-III-R) were selected. Diagnoses were made on the basis of medical records (anamnestic data, previous diagnosis confirmed during rehospitalization, clinical data, urine analyses for drug exposure) and personal files from different sources (psychological, criminal and so on) were analyzed. Moreover, all subjects were interviewed informally (A.B.) and were asked about the relationship between the drug used and their tattoos. In addition, in order to establish that these tattoos are not casual findings, photographs and pictures of tattoos from the literature were shown to all subjects, and they were asked to choose the tattoos related to their personal drug abuse and to explain their meaning, purpose, and why a specific location on the body was chosen.

This study was not performed in an academic setting; no approval from an institutional review board was obtained. Our study is only descriptive and involved no type of intervention, procedure or medication. However, verbal patient consent was obtained and documented.

Results

Forty-one tattooed male subjects with diagnosis of substance abuse or dependence were selected out of 351 screened (11.7%). The subjects were 18-35 years old (mean±SD: 23.7±6.3 years), and had 47 tattoos related to drug use (6.0% of total tattoos). These images are divided into: a) a tattoo design related to drug use in general (GT); and b) a tattoo design related to a specific drug (DT), (7). Among them 29 persons acquired their tattoos in prison and 12 persons acquired their tattoos outside prison. Tattoos were classified according to their location on the body and according to the specific drug used as well as the characteristic method of drug ingestion (inhalation, injection, etc.).

Sixteen images (34%) belonged to the GT group (Fig. 1, 2), while 31 tattoos fell in the DT group. Among these, 18 tattoos (38%) were related to the use of cannabinoids (Fig. 3-6); 8 (17%) were connected to use of opioids (Fig. 7-10); and 5 (11%) tattoos were found on persons using hallucinogenic drugs (Fig. 11). One person had 4 different tattoos that were related to the same theme (cannabinoids), another person had 3 tattoos concerning general substance use and in addition one person had 2 different tattoos that were related to opioids.

When shown photographs or pictures of tattoos related to drug use, 29 subjects with criminal records demonstrated considerable agreement as to their symbolism. Images relating to the DT group, such as “spiders” (especially in combination with web) were identified by 25 (86%) of the subjects; “genie” was similarly identified by 15 (51%), and “harem” by 11 (37%) subjects. These images were recognized as “typical” markers of a person who prefers use of cannabinoids. Variations of “poppy” images (as symbols of opioid use) were identified by 7 (24%) subjects. Images from the GT group, indicating drug use in general, such as symbols of “death” — skulls, bones and skeletons — were identified by 18 (62%) subjects; images of syringes (symbols of objects used in the injection of drugs) were identified by 3 (10%) subjects.
subjects. Even among the subjects who had no criminal records, 5 of 12 (42%) identified “spiders,” 4 (33%) persons identified “leaf of hemp” (a leaf which has a distinctive form [18]), and 2 (17%) persons identified the “genie” as markers related to the use of cannabinoids. Two persons from this group identified images of “mushrooms” as a symbol of hallucinogens.

Among the specific tattoos, the GT such as “syringes” were found in 12.8% (Fig. 7-10) and different symbols of death, such as “skull with snake,” were found in 4.3% of all persons (Fig. 6). The DT such as “spiders” were discovered in 19.2% of persons (Fig. 1, 2), “poppies” (10.6%) (Fig. 7, 10), “genie,” “genie flying from jug” (Fig. 4), and different images of “half-moon” (oriental motifs indicative of regions where cannabinoids are grown or easily purchased [6, 7]) were found in 8.5% of persons, “harem” (another oriental motif where the central figure is a man smoking a hookah; figures of naked dancing women indicate sexual fantasy resulting from the use of cannabinoids [17]) in 6.4%, and “leaf of hemp” in 4.3% (Fig. 3).
The consistent identification and interpretation of particular images from both the DT and GT groups demonstrates that the appearance of these images in the tattoos of our subjects was not incidental, and that these images are truly special markers among persons using drugs.

Regarding location, 8 (17%) tattoos were found on the back of the hands, 6 (14.9%) on the upper extremities and 5 (10.5%) on the antecubital area. This last was the only location exclusively related to drug abuse. Less common locations were neck, palm of the hand, clavicle area and biceps. This is in contrast to typical criminal images which were usually located on shoulders, under the clavicle area and on fingers (1, 16, 17). In each of these locations only 1 tattoo was found. It should be mentioned that 80.9% of all tattoos were found on covered skin, whereas 19.1% were on uncovered skin: hands, dorsum and palm. Of all tattoos, 93.7% were located on the front of the body, and 6.3% on the back. Twenty-one (44.7%) tattoos were located on the upper extremities, 13 (27.7%) on the lower extremities, 10 (21.3%) on thorax and abdomen, and 3 (6.3%) on the upper part of back.

Some tattoos in certain places, such as forearms and the antecubital area, were made in order to hide scar tissue or sclerosed veins caused by the injection of drugs. Other tattoos were made with the opposite aim — to highlight the area of injection. This includes specific tattoos showing the place of injection for use in case of “emergency,” such as a craving for
drugs during withdrawal. In Russian slang, these tattoos are referred to as “draw-well” and/or “star trace” (Fig. 12). Tattoos such as “syringes with butterfly-wings” or “genie flying out from jug” reflected the desirable/expected or experienced drug effects, such as a sense of ease or euphoria.

Nine (21.2%) persons reported a special correlation between belonging to a certain subculture and their specific tattoo. Moreover, the slang used often provided a “key” to understanding the meaning of the tattoo.

We found 5 tattoos which had cryptic meanings, such as “8” or “13” which stand for the 8th and 13th letter of the English alphabet, “H” and “M,” which in turn stand for heroin and marijuana (Fig.13). Similarly, “3” and “5” refer to the 3rd and 5th letters (“C” and “E”), which stand for cocaine and “eater” (an addict who takes drugs orally). The numbers “99.9” and “999” mean “very pure heroin.”

Discussion
Our findings show that there are tattoos related to drug use and that some of them have standard locations. For example, tattoos on the cubital fold may have multiple functional purposes: on the one hand indicating the spot where injections may easily be made, and on the other hand masking scar-tissue and sclerosed veins. We found that certain images (poppies, spiders, syringes) have close relationships with specific drugs and the ways in which they are used.

Regarding symbolic meaning, the spider (for example) is not always easy to understand. Firstly, in the 1970s-1980s the spider images were very popular among criminal elements of the former USSR, indicating common drug use or sale. Later, the huge prevalence of the use of cannabis products found expression in tattoos. Most of the subjects examined could not explain the symbolic meaning of the spider. But some explained the spider-web as a symbol of their own imprisonment and hopelessness. The spider was explained as a symbol for a man who can obtain and distribute drugs. Bennahum suggests another explanation of this symbol, in which “the paralytic poison of the Black Widow may represent the poison of heroin” (19).

Drug-related images were shown to have their own specific symbolism in overt (obvious) motifs (knife, executioner, syringe, poppy and so on) as well as “covert” motifs (finger-ring, stars, spider, abbreviations and so on). There are common locations for tattoo placement with both types of images. However, in contrast to GT, there are fixed places only for DT. These tattoos frequently depict drug paraphernalia and are strategically placed to conceal injection marks.

Several researchers reported that some tattoos (such as “spiders,” “syringes” and “images of death”) and their location (fingers and antecubital area) indicate that its owner belongs to a certain group, that
he prefers a specific drug and/or a specific method of drug use; the desirable or expected drug effects (6, 7, 19) may also be indicated. For example, a signet ring with spider or the number “13” indicates that the subject prefers cannabinoids (6, 7).

We would like to note that this study has some limitations: This is a descriptive, naturalistic study with no control group, which was performed in one specific subculture (the former Soviet Union); the examined sample is small and includes only males. Our results and their implications are circumscribed in that this sample included only those substance abusers who had tattoos related to drug abuse. The study may also be relevant only to tattoos acquired during a given time period, as there are changing fashions in tattooing.

However, while this article is not a comprehensive guide, the results are consistent with our former findings, namely that tattoos may indicate the use or abuse of certain psychoactive substances. This may be especially useful in cases where specific images are found on persons who have no known history of drug abuse (1, 6, 17, 19, 20).

Further prospective studies are needed in this relatively untrodden field, and we hope that the present report will help to stimulate additional research in a larger patient population.

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