

# Tattoos: Not as permanent as they used to be

By Geoff Kirbyson

WHEN Megan Crawford walked into a tattoo parlour with three of her friends a decade ago, she had no idea of the grief that trip would ultimately cause her.

The quartet decided on a whim that they should each get a tattoo, sort of a bonding thing. One friend got a gecko on her calf, another got a flower on her foot and Crawford, fresh from returning from teaching English in Japan for a year, opted for what she believed was the Japanese symbol for “love” on her ankle. The fourth girl backed out.

“I believed the artist,” Crawford said, admitting that, in retrospect, it was obvious he wasn’t fluent in any Asian languages.

The artistry was good enough for the \$75 it cost her but the trouble began a year or two later when her soon-to-be husband asked her about the tattoo’s origins. Crawford had dated another guy during her time in Japan and even though the symbol wasn’t a name, it might as well have been for her fiancé. (Ironically, tattoos are largely frowned up in Japanese society and can get you thrown out of restaurants or other public places.)

“It was just a symbol to me but he didn’t feel that way,” she says.

Crawford dug her heels in at first but eventually she came to understand his position and agreed to have it removed.

“It didn’t mean that much to me one way or the other,” she says.

Luckily, the symbol was an excellent candidate to be completely eradicated. It wasn’t too big – about the size of a loonie – and it was black, one of the easiest colours to break apart with a laser. (Brown, yellow, orange, pink, white, purple and green are more troublesome to remove.)

Here’s how laser treatment works: the lasers produce short pulses of intense light that pass through the top layers of skin to the lower levels where the ink sits. This energy breaks the ink into smaller particles that are then removed by the body’s natural skin growth and healing processes. There is often minimal, but temporary, scarring to the skin after a laser treatment.

There are no industry statistics but experts say anecdotal evidence indicates up to half of all people who get a tattoo end up getting it removed.



**That tramp stamp you thought was a good idea in university might not impress your kids years later. If you’re having regrets, have it removed.**

As trendy as tattoos have become in recent years, the business of removing them is growing just as fast or faster. Winnipeg-based dermatologist Dr. Earl Minuk bought a laser system 15 years ago that removed birthmarks and broken blood vessels from his patients’ skin. It wasn’t long before he branched off into tattoos.

“I had patients saying to me, ‘you have lasers, why aren’t you taking off tattoos?’” he said.

There’s no question the laser is more painful than getting the original tattoo but if you apply a topical cream beforehand, it can ease the sting.

Most tattoos are completed with a single visit but that’s not the case with their removal. Depending on the size and number of colours, you’re likely looking at a half-dozen or more visits and hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of dollars in costs. It’s generally recommended people wait four to six weeks between laser treatments.

But Minuk says his patients tell him the benefits are more than worth it. In fact, many of them say it’s “life-altering.”

“It can be fantastic. You take your old spouse’s or old boyfriend’s name off and it’s a relief. It’s often a mistake (in the first place). After awhile, you don’t want to be reminded of them anymore,” he says.

There can be an even bigger cost if you keep a visible tattoo when it’s time to enter the workforce. Minuk says many employers won’t hire people who have visible tattoos on their hands, neck or face because it doesn’t portray the right image for their business.

After several treatments, Crawford’s tattoo is almost gone. In fact, you can’t even tell what it was originally.

“It has faded considerably. I’m glad Dr. Minuk has a good laser. I probably shouldn’t have gotten the tattoo in the first place,” she says.