

enemy lines

No longer the preserve of jail birds, tough guys and sailors, tattoos have moved up the social ladder. But as **Amanda Cropp** discovers, it pays to think before you ink

Geri Saville can't wait for the day when she can shop for low-cut tops and relax poolside in a bikini without worrying about exposing her tattoos. Even looking in the mirror is an ordeal. "I can't stand them; I hate looking at them," she says. To erase the moon and star tattooed on her breast and the Celtic design on her stomach, the 35-year-old Dunedin beautician is undergoing laser therapy, which shatters ink particles so they can be carried away by the bloodstream.

Physically and financially, the pain is considerable. The treatment will cost \$1600 all up and is so excruciating that Saville, also a registered nurse, injects herself with local anaesthetic before each session. "It's like having hot fat poured on your skin."

Saville says her parents "went nuts" when they finally caught sight of her first tattoo, which she had done at the age of 17 and successfully hid for a year. The novelty quickly wore off and shopping for clothes became a cover-up exercise. "I was very self-conscious. I feel people judge me because of them. In my social circle it's not really acceptable to have a tattoo; it's not classy. I see these women with huge amounts of artwork on them and wonder, 'What's that going to look like in 20 years' time and are you still going to love it?'"

Tanyamaree Bishop, owner of Auckland's Caci Medispa Newmarket, says she regularly fields sheepish Monday-morning phone calls from those who have acquired a tacky tattoo during a drunken night out. "Sometimes friends have done it when they're passed out." The clinic often lasers off misspelled words. Divorce is also a big source of work, with people wanting ex-partners' names erased.

"The typical client is a woman around 37 or 38," says John Webster, who runs Invisible Ink, a tattoo removal clinic in Tauranga. "She got a tattoo when she was 18, thought it was great. She's now in her thirties, a mum on the PTA and it's really knocking her confidence because it's not who she is today. It's quite amazing the level of self-confidence you restore [through removal]."

And tattoo removal isn't confined to highly visible areas of the body. "One young lady had the words 'Your Name' tattooed on her bottom. I imagine she was a bit of a character and won a few free rounds of beer at the bar by going up to guys and saying, 'I bet I have your name on my backside.'"

"One patient attempted to tattoo words on his forehead while looking in a mirror, and the letters ended up back to front"

Webster's appalled by the shoddy work done by amateurs who have purchased tattoo guns off TradeMe for a couple of hundred dollars, and his website carries a testimonial from a young woman who got well lubricated at a party and let a bloke loose on her calf. "It's horrible, horrible stuff. We're removing one off a guy at the moment who has two supposed angel wings on his back which are awful."

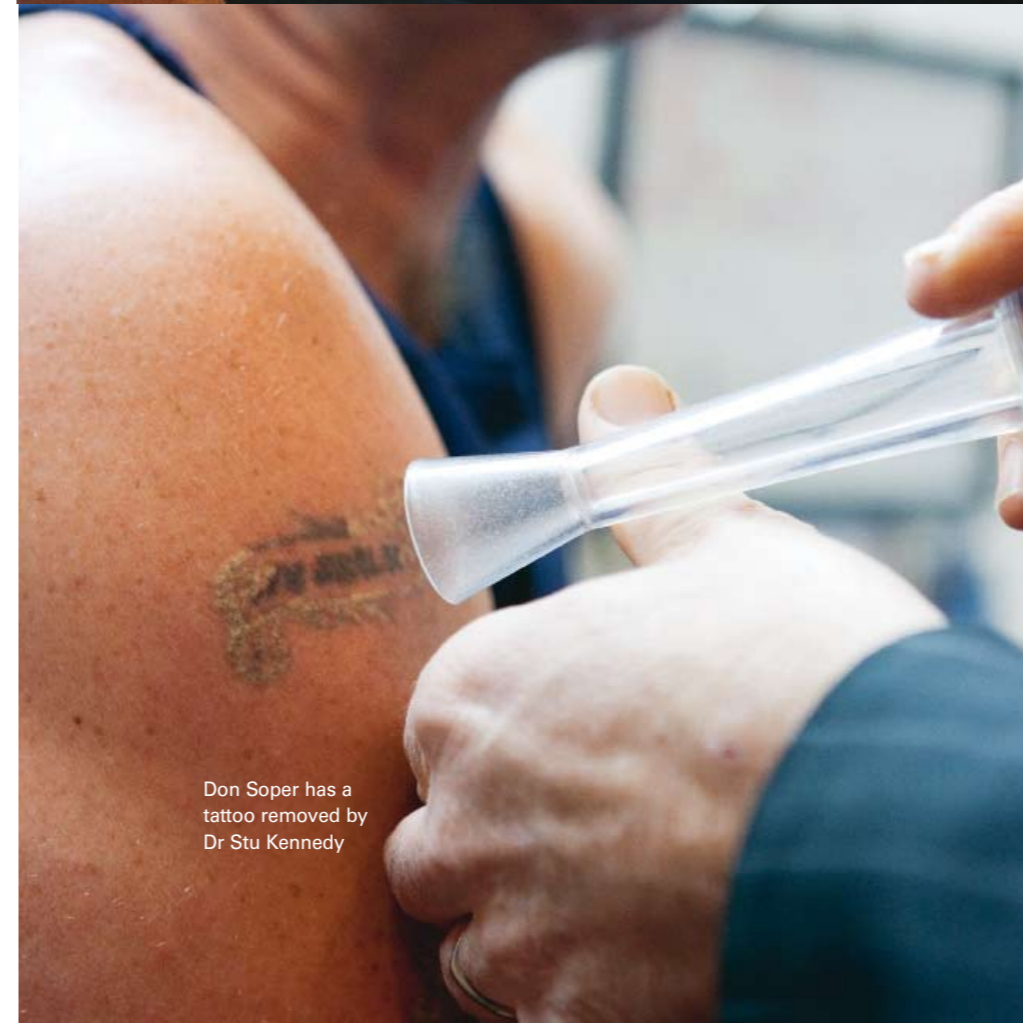
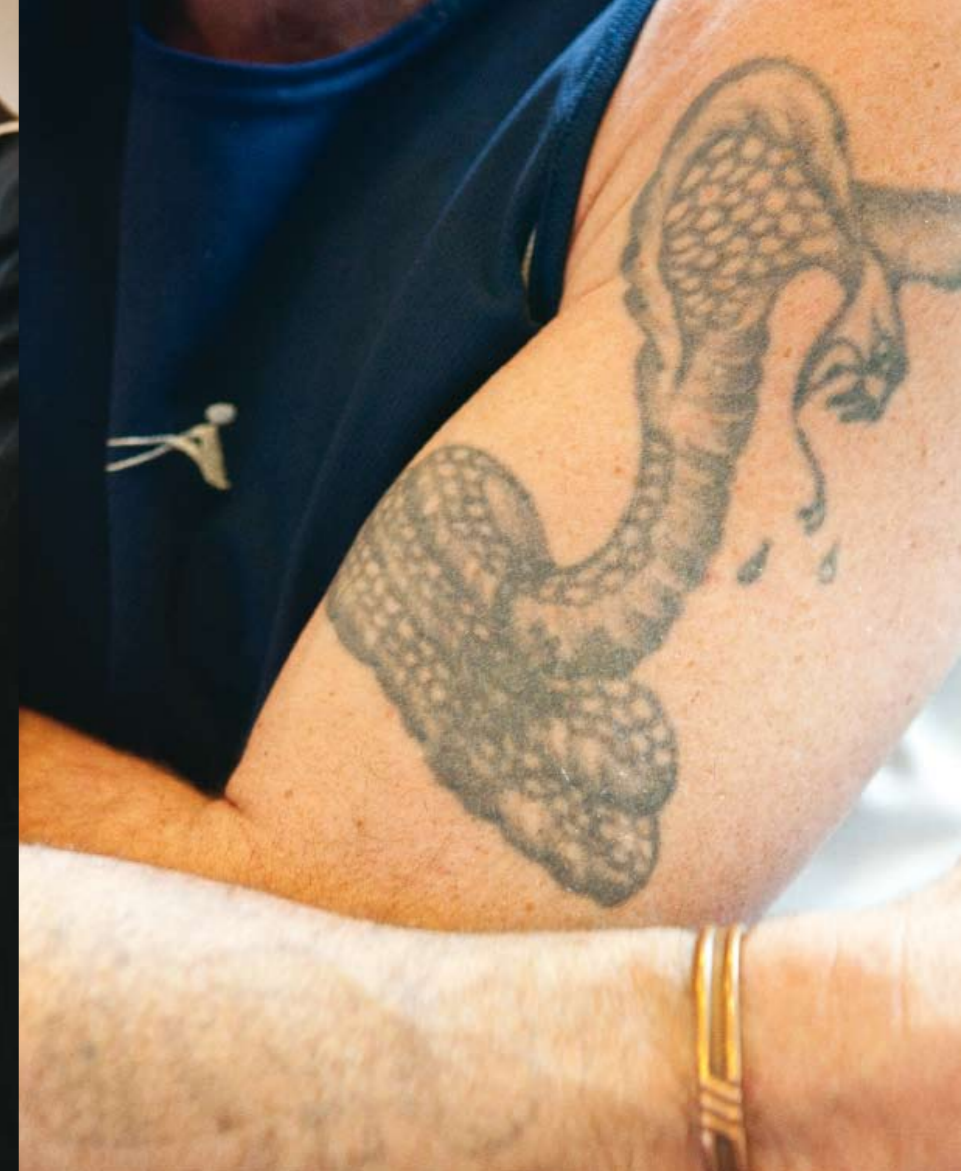
Despite the risk of transmitting infections like hepatitis and HIV if hygiene standards aren't maintained, the Ministry of Health doesn't regulate tattooing or tattoo products. It provides guidelines on the safe piercing of skin, and some local authorities have bylaws, but you don't need a licence or professional qualification to buy tattooing equipment online.

After two complaints about the sale of tattoo supplies, TradeMe now requires tattoo-kit sellers to include references to the Ministry of Health guidelines. One seller told a buyer he wouldn't sell tattoo machines to minors on ethical grounds. TradeMe trust and safety manager Chris Budge says account holders are supposed to be 18 or over anyway.

Although tattoo inks are controlled by the Environmental Risk Management Authority, an ERMA spokeswoman says risks associated with injecting these substances under the skin haven't been specifically assessed here. ERMA is discussing the safety of tattoo inks and their regulation with the Ministry of Health. It's also monitoring the outcome of a US Food and Drug Administration investigation into the potential health risks of tattoo inks, some of which are pigmented with industrial-grade colours intended for use in printing inks and car paint. DIY tattooists have been known to use everything from boot polish to tyre scrapings in lieu of proper tattoo inks.

Christchurch GP Stu Kennedy has treated 5000 clients since commencing laser therapy 11 years ago, but he won't touch tattoos done in acrylic ink. "It would be like melting plastic," he says. Homemade tattoos in regular black ink are generally easier to remove, but deeper, heavily inked professional tattoos usually require more treatments, and new colours – bright greens, sky blues – are almost impossible to remove completely. The lasering process can also leave some clients with a permanent patch of pale skin.

Kennedy's album of before and after shots includes a man with an eye tattooed on each buttock. "You wouldn't believe some of the places I've taken them off,"



Don Soper has a tattoo removed by Dr Stu Kennedy

PHOTOGRAPHS: GUY FREDERICK

he says. One patient attempted to tattoo words on his forehead while looking in a mirror, and the letters ended up back to front.

Kennedy notes that regret usually sets in after about a decade, so anyone contemplating getting a tattoo should think well ahead. "In 10 years' time, are you going to have the same hairstyle you have now, or wear the same clothes?"

Before laser treatment, tattoos were removed via dermabrasion or excision, leaving unsightly scars. Don Soper, now 52, was left with 28 stitches when he had a tattoo cut from his leg around 10 years ago. "It said 'Born Free'," he says. "'Born Stupid' would be more like it. I had a girl's name on my arm and I got a friend, a medic in the army, to cut it out. He gave me a local and did it with a scalpel."

Soper expects to spend around \$4000 getting his six remaining tattoos removed at Kennedy's clinic. Treatments are conducted every six weeks and each session costs \$60 to \$150, depending on the size of the inked area. He declines anaesthetic for the 5300 "shots" administered by a laser during each five-minute appointment. "I have a cigarette before I come in," he explains.

Soper's tattoos were a youthful indiscretion, some of them self-inflicted with a needle and Indian ink. "I was living in a workman's camp at 15. There were some pretty hard men there and it was a way of being accepted by the crowd I was living and working with. My father hated tattoos and it was a way of rebelling against him.

"I hated them right from the start. I didn't wear short-sleeved shirts until I was 25, I was that embarrassed." He points to a faded image on his arm. "This was an eagle; now it looks more like a budgie. I have mates who are Maori and their tattoos show their heritage and family, and they mean something. Mine are just stamps; none of them means anything."

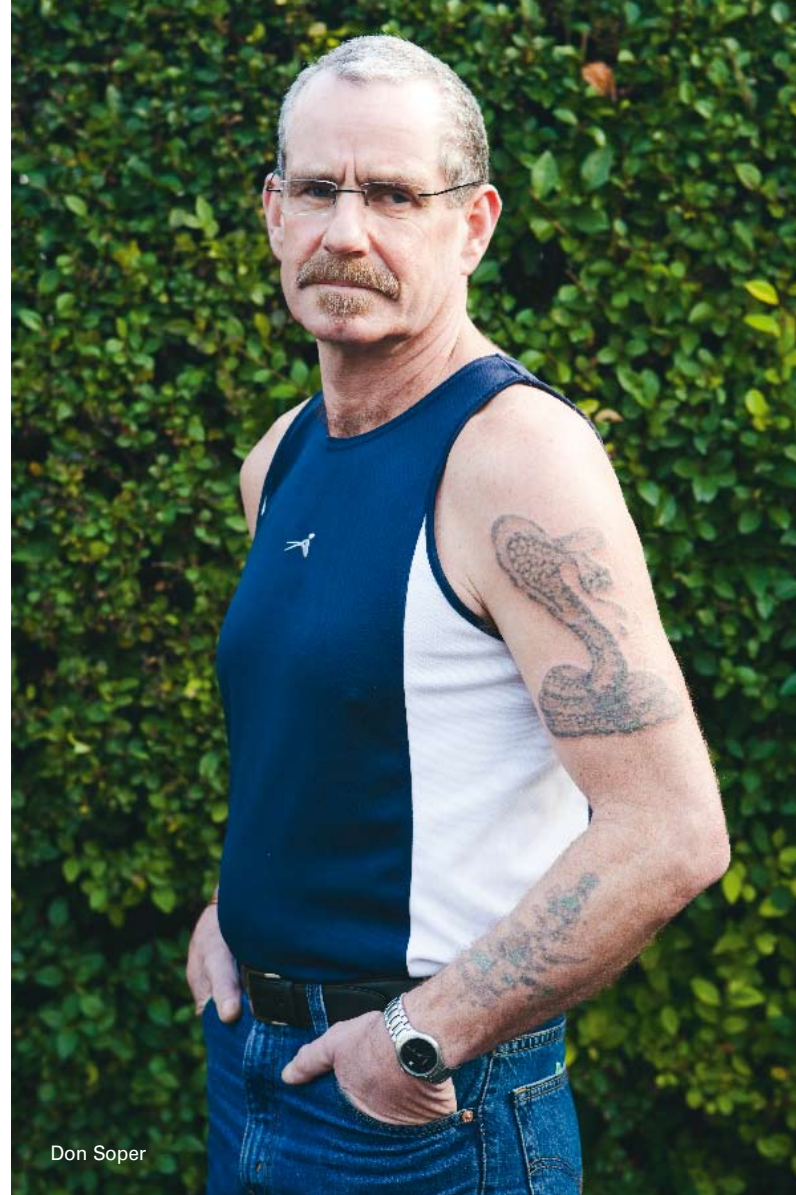
Soper's now a freezing worker, but when he was employed by a top horse trainer he was reluctant to bare his tattoos in front of wealthy horse owners. "I used to feel I was being judged, and you can't blame them."

Work and Income New Zealand covers removal costs for people actively seeking work if a tattoo is hindering their chances of employment (in the year to May it made 22 payments totalling \$5690). Ashburton waitress Nicole Warden, 20, says her employers were pretty relaxed about the lotus blossom tattooed on her forearm, a memento of a trip to Egypt (where it's the national flower), along with a verse from her favourite song. But within six months she was knocking on Kennedy's clinic door. "The flower's just too bold," she says. "A lady said it looked like a burn. Then I got it shaded and a friend said, 'Now it looks like a bruise.' I didn't want to be serving customers food or handing money over to them with it being visible."

Despite undergoing "de-flowering" via laser, Warden says tattoos are addictive and intends to get more, although next time she'll be more careful about her choice of tattoo artist.

Professional tattoo studios are increasingly antsy about backyard operators who are prepared to do anything on anyone, creating a high risk of regret down the track. Zealand Tattoo in Christchurch's High Street fashion precinct looks like a cross between a dentist's surgery and an art gallery, with its spotless recliner treatment chairs, Catholic iconography decor and computers on which clients

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can browse the studio's catalogue during consultations.

Owner Zane Swanston says tattoos should be timeless, rather than fad designs that will quickly date. He won't do anything he deems tasteless, such as Playboy bunnies, swastikas or gang slogans. Like other professional tattooists interviewed by *Sunday*, he refuses to use the fluorescent colours that are available online to create tattoos that glow under black light. He's concerned that fluorescent inks may be carcinogenic and says they can turn brown or yellow when exposed to the sun.

When nearby studio Otautahi Tattoo offered free tattoos to celebrate its second birthday this year, more than 300 people queued up, some camping out overnight. Managing director Brad Cone won't tattoo anyone under 18 without parental consent (and no one under 16), and he says if clients show signs that they might live to regret a tattoo, like a girl who says, "If I don't like it I can always get it removed," the artists will talk them out of it. Right now it's fashionable to get lines of script tattooed on the neck, but Cone doesn't encourage that for a first-timer. "You need to graduate to it," he says. About 10 percent of his studio's business comes from "cover-ups" – new designs that obliterate old ones – which are increasingly being sought by young people.

But getting a cover-up was never an option for Don Soper, who can't wait for the day when his arms are "clean" again. "I'm going to get a photo taken and put it on my mother's grave. She used to love watching me play sport, but she always hated the tattoos. Every Christmas and birthday she'd say, 'Don, you'd be a fine-looking young man if you didn't have those tattoos.'" ■