

Body art

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The recent warm weather might have caused further debate on global warming but has also revealed some extra knowledge about our patients – that the most unexpected of them have tattoos.

There was a time when it was called tattooing and piercing. That's when the former was, generally speaking, the preserve of 'lower socio-economic groupings' (as the sociologists have it) and the latter was reserved for a certain type of feminine, or curiously, very masculine lobe. As we were warned when we were teetering on the edge of the abyss of our clinical years at dental school, 'discrete earrings for women are acceptable but men with earrings are either pirates or poofs.'

How it has all changed. It is far more likely now that the sociologists themselves are the ones with such adornments, especially as the whole subject is now classified under the far more alluring and culturally acceptable terminology of 'body art'.

Professionally speaking there are two areas in which we might have a legitimate interest in all of this. Relax, I mean subject areas rather than body zones. One is the concern that premises where such body adornments are applied have acceptable standards of cross-infection control and the other that mouth piercings are not having an adverse effect on oral health. But even writing this makes us sound rather prosaic in a world that has thrown caution to the wind and had the rainbow spectrum of coloured inks insinuated into its visible dermis.

Although here's the funny thing, not all of it is visible. Now what is that about? Is it the same as having a Van Gogh at home in the attic that you just don't want anyone to share or know about, or is it the deliciousness of having a 'secret' that you can choose to share only with your most special friends?

Be that as it may, one of the completely unanticipated spin-offs of climate change (if indeed this wonderfully hot summer is anything to do with that at all or just the jackpot chance of three suns aligning in the one-armed bandit of the weather slot-machine) is that more flesh has been revealed more often, and in the surgery.

So, for example, upper arms, usually modestly covered in traditional long-sleeved British garb like shirts, blouses and jumpers have been exposed by a clammy rush for the short-sleeved or even the sleeveless. Consequently, the most surprising of patients have suddenly revealed the delicate tracery of their Celtic fertility bands and the intricate needlework of ancient Chinese peace symbols. Not that I imagine these are without their perils in terms of translation. Unless the bearer actually speaks Ming Dynasty Cantonese how can they be sure that the beautiful symbols actually convey greetings of harmony and don't proclaim the revenge of the scorned oriental with such sentiments as 'what a funny place to have a tattoo', or worse.

Similarly, others have been revealed as a trouser leg rises above a sock-less sandal

the spine as the patient leans forward for the mouthwash and their clothes part in a sort of Red Sea disclosure motion. The fascination is that they are not only borne by people you least expect but also that there are some intriguing designs. Ornate trellis-work the type of which experts can be seen eulogising over as they decorate tops and shelves of oak dressers on the *Antiques Roadshow* or complex patterns of rune-like characters that Gandalf and Frodo would no doubt spend hours poring over, if they were on dusty parchments rather than hovering just above twenty-first century waistbands.

With piercings our expectations are being stretched too. People 'who should know better' are turning up with tongue studs and cheek piercings with apparently nary a care about their potential periodontal attachment loss or exaggerated frenum pull. Goodness knows what their family members must think of them either. How on earth can children, and indeed grandchildren, of the baby boomer generation express their right to rebellion with their

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(rare enough in these draughty shores). A small sea shell perhaps, a tiny Egyptian priestess or a Pict couple engaged in sorcery. Gone now seem to be the more macho crossed daggers dripping blood or even the ornate hearts with doves fluttering about with 'Mum' or the name of a loved one indelibly carved as the centrepiece. In tandem with the times, the names of those so honoured have also moved on, instead of the Thelmas, Doras and Marions, we see not only the likes of Kylies, Tracys and Sharons, but also Waynes, Deans and Jasons, and not always on the gender of arms that we expect.

Not that it is solely down to the recent burst of summer sunshine. There is often the inadvertent peek offered at the base of

elders appropriating the latest symbols of dissent? What 15-year-old wants to see his mum with a naval ring, which adolescent daughter catching a glimpse of dad's coiled snake ankle tattoo in sky-blue denim?

No doubt with the creeping autumn mists and the gradual reversion to warmer and 'more sensible' clothing as harvest festival comes on apace, the world will revert to slightly less extreme forms of social display. Perhaps attention will turn again towards wider smiles, whiter teeth and the possibility of tooth jewellery instead. Never mind, summer was fun while it lasted.

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