

Rethinking Ink: Laser Tattoo Removal Takes Off

By JOSÉE ROSE

Dow Jones Newswires

Six years ago, Lisa Bianchi thought getting a tattoo around her right upper arm was a good idea. "But now it just doesn't look right anymore, especially when I try to dress up for a nice banquet or dinner," the 25-year-old said.

Ms. Bianchi, of Middletown, N.J., is a part of a growing number of Americans who've decided to get tattoos removed. According to survey results released in September by the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, almost 55,000 out of 914,427 of laser surgeries performed in 2003-2005 were tattoo removals.

Laser tattoo removal takes longer, and is more expensive, than getting a tattoo. Depending on the tattoo's size, each treatment can run anywhere from a couple of hundred to a few thousand dollars. Patients usually get a minimum of six treatments.

But depending on the color, the tattoo may not be removable. Black and red are the easiest to remove, while brighter colors are harder to remove because the pigments are resistant to lasers, Jeffrey Dover, associate clinical professor of dermatology at Yale School of Medicine, said. White is impossible



A young woman in California displays a 'broken-heart' tattoo.

Corbis

to remove, and will turn black.

According to Roy Geronemus, director of the Laser and Skin Surgery Center, and clinical professor of dermatology at New York University Medical Center, a local anesthetic is used to numb the area, and then the laser is used. After the pro-

cedure is done, there's a healing process as the tattoo lightens over the next four to eight weeks.

Dr. Geronemus warned that the biggest risk in laser tattoo removal surgery is changes in skin pigmentation. "There is always the potential that tattoos cannot be removed completely, but the darker the skin, the harder it is to remove," he said. Scarring is possible, but not likely if the correct laser is used. "The lasers don't burn tissue; with the appropriate wavelength, pulse duration and Q-switch laser, one can selectively destroy the pigment in the tattoo without destroying the skin," he said.

But patients looking for complete tattoo removal will be disappointed. "There might be a ghost of the tattoo or some color," Dr. Dover said. "The process is better than it used to be, but it's still not perfect." Other techniques include excision and dermabrasion. Both will probably leave a scar.

According to experts and physicians, the most common group of patients seeking laser tattoo removal surgery are young professionals, because "they think the tattoo gives the wrong message," said Dr. Dover.