Infectious Complications of Body Piercing

Sir—In their review of the infectious complications of body piercing [1], Tweeten and Rickman have given serious treatment to a topic that has been largely ignored in the medical literature. The explosion in popularity of body piercing [2] mandates that practicing physicians gain some familiarity with the medical issues that surround this phenomenon.

While the authors note that legislation regulating body piercing has been introduced in recent years (California, Delaware, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin have all passed such legislation since 1994), they do not stress that these laws are heterogeneous in nature, and that some laws, such as those passed in Louisiana and Delaware, may paradoxically increase the risk of transmission of blood-borne disease. Delaware House Bill 93 and Louisiana Senate Bill 940, both passed in 1997, simply mandate that individuals under the age of 18 years obtain parental consent in order to undergo piercing. This law does not provide adults with protection from bacterial or viral diseases transferable by piercing, and will increase the likelihood that some adolescents will undergo unclean piercing by amateur or untrained practitioners, who would be less likely to fear legal censure (such as being fined or closed down by a state department of health).

Another unfortunate flaw in recent legislation in several states is the exclusion of ear-piercing performed with “piercing guns” from the definition of body piercing, including California (Assembly Bill 186), apparently due to lobbying by the groups involved in the ear-piercing trade [3]; unfortunately, this has exempted from regulation the piercing of the cartilaginous structures of the auricle, which may be particularly vulnerable to cosmetically devastating infections [4]. Piercing guns themselves are problematic, and are avoided by many experienced piercers, as they tend to cause local trauma, are inaccurate, and cannot be effectively sterilized, or even decontaminated, as a result of their size and complexity [5].

The data suggesting transmission of hepatitis B and C viruses, outlined by Tweeten and Rickman, as well as the recent report linking HIV transmission to body piercing [6], suggest that the body piercing phenomenon needs to be taken seriously by clinicians and public health workers. The medical community should take an interest in, and attempt to guide, emerging legislation that seeks to make body piercing safer to the public.

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References

Reply

Sir—We wish to thank Dr. Fisman for his thoughtful comments on our article. The focus of the article was the infectious complications of body piercing, and not regulatory issues. Although we did not emphasize the heterogeneity of state legislation regarding the regulation of body piercing, we are cognizant of the fact that the mere passing of legislation will not prevent the transmission of infectious agents. If persons desire to be pierced, whether adolescent or adult, they will do so, irrespective of regulations passed by elected officials. It would appear that Fisman is advocating that a uniform standard be adopted on a state-by-state basis or at the federal level for the regulation of body piercing to ensure legislative uniformity in the United States. Such a task would be extremely difficult, and would perhaps require an advocate for the cause.

We agree that the exclusion of ear-piercing “guns” from the definition of body piercing legislation is problematic; this could paradoxically lead to increased use of these instruments, which were not designed for use on the auricular cartilage. It is especially troubling to find a widespread increase in the number of retail establishments staffed by persons with little or no training offering cartilage piercings. Clinicians, epidemiologists, and public health officials should take a more proactive role using scientific and public health principles in guiding the rational development of emerging legislation regulating body piercing.

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