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Are nurses with visible tattoos subject to public stigmatisation?

Tattoos can hold a significant cultural connection for different people around the world including, but not limited to, indigenous peoples such as the Māori population. However, there can be an associated societal stigma with having tattoos, especially for people whose tattoos are visible to others. When surveyed, 34% of people indicated that visible tattoos for doctors or nurses were not acceptable with this reducing to 25% for paramedics, however, the acceptability rate increased to 38% and 42% respectively if a tattoo were visible, but not on either a person's face or neck (YouGov, 2022). Elements such as the location, number and design of the tattoo/s along with the perception of tattoos could intersect with person's sex, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic background. This could possibly lead to differing levels of stigma being experienced by the person who is tattooed. Looking at this through the lens of healthcare, and more specifically nursing, provides a different consideration: how others, including people accessing healthcare provision, may stigmatise the nurse treating them if the nurse has visible tattoos. This could include questioning their skill and proficiency levels, empathy or their professionalism. The National Health Service (NHS) uniform policies will often highlight that offensive tattoos should be concealed, however what they each deem offensive can be subjective, with some referencing religious tattoos or those which indicate sports affiliation (NHS Borders, 2019; NHS The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, 2022). It is important to be aware that some tattoos could always be deemed to be offensive however, the discussion here is about generally deemed non-contentious and non-offensive tattoos, for example, tattoos which are not political or sexual in nature (NHS Borders, 2019).

Professional and Organisational Stigma

Nursing is still a predominantly female based profession with approximately 90% of all Nursing and Midwifery Council registered nurses identifying as female (Royal College of Nursing, 2018). Whilst women with visible tattoos can be seen as more confident, they can also attract stigma including perceptions of being less honest, less capable and less intelligent (Broussard and Harton, 2018). This convergence could potentially call into question their capability to be competent nurses who can practice safely if they were to have visible tattoos. The Equality Act (2010) protects from discrimination, however whilst having a tattoo visible or otherwise is not a protected characteristic, sex and religion are and if there were to be a gender-based or religious component in play then perhaps this could be deemed as a form of discrimination. Aligned to this, the *Human Rights Act 1998* supports freedom of thought and freedom of expression. These tattoos may or may not be visible or they may not have any tattoos at any stage in their career. In either of these situations, should there be an impact on the perceived level of care they provide or the professionalism they exhibit?

Where is the stigma being manifested?

There is an increase in prevalence of tattoos in society which inherently means there is more potential for these to be visible (YouGov, 2022). Questions arising from this include: is there a difference between perceptions of a visibility tattooed nurse and their sex or gender? Is it the public who have issues with a visibly tattooed nurse, the organisational perception that there will be stigma from visible tattoos or is there an internalised stigma becoming manifest from the nurses themselves? Whilst research has been undertaken around some aspects of public perception and a person who is tattooed there is a lack of specificity to the different areas of nursing and the environments in which they practice.

Is it more acceptable for example for a nurse working in accident and emergency to be visibly tattooed in comparison with a nurse working in palliative care? If so, why? Would it be deemed more appropriate for a registered mental health nurse to have visible tattoos compared to a children's and young people's nurse? Though it is worth considering whether there is an inherent perceived view of these areas and specialities of nursing.

Challenging Stereotypes

If tattoos are demonstrative of a particular culture or community does this increase stigma? Contrastingly, if these can be de facto protected characteristics as recognised by the *Equality Act, 2010* what then for those who have tattoos without any connected significance? Are they more or less likely to encounter stigma? Does this change how they are perceived by the public?

There is already an innate level of stigma within nursing, especially concerning the portrayal of nurses within the media, including a hypersexualised view of female nurses and a pre-determined viewpoint of male nurses' sexuality (Kearns and Mahon, 2021; Weaver *et al.*, 2013). Nease *et al.* (2021) found that although there was some stigma evident regarding the perceptions of nurses with visible tattoos within acute and emergency departments, overall people accessing these services were less concerned with the tattoos themselves and more concerned with the care received. This could help support the creation of NHS uniform policy guidance which provides appropriate levels of confidence for those with visible tattoos supporting these nurses to demonstrate their levels of knowledge and skill with their actions rather than by appearance alone (Nease *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

Further research would be required to explore the perception of visibly tattooed nurses in different clinical settings and situations to understand any pre-conceptions and stigma that may be manifest. This could then lead to a campaign to enhance public understanding and awareness aiming to reduce stigma and for people to embrace difference and diversity and ultimately lead to a situation where nurses are assessed purely on the quality of the care they provide, not how they look or may present while delivering this care. Tattoos can hold significant cultural importance or stigma however, generally deemed non-offensive tattoos could allow nurses to be themselves and feel able to express their identity without fear of prejudice. This safer, more secure workforce, less concerned about societal pressures to conform, can focus upon delivering patient care and lead to enhanced patient outcomes.

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