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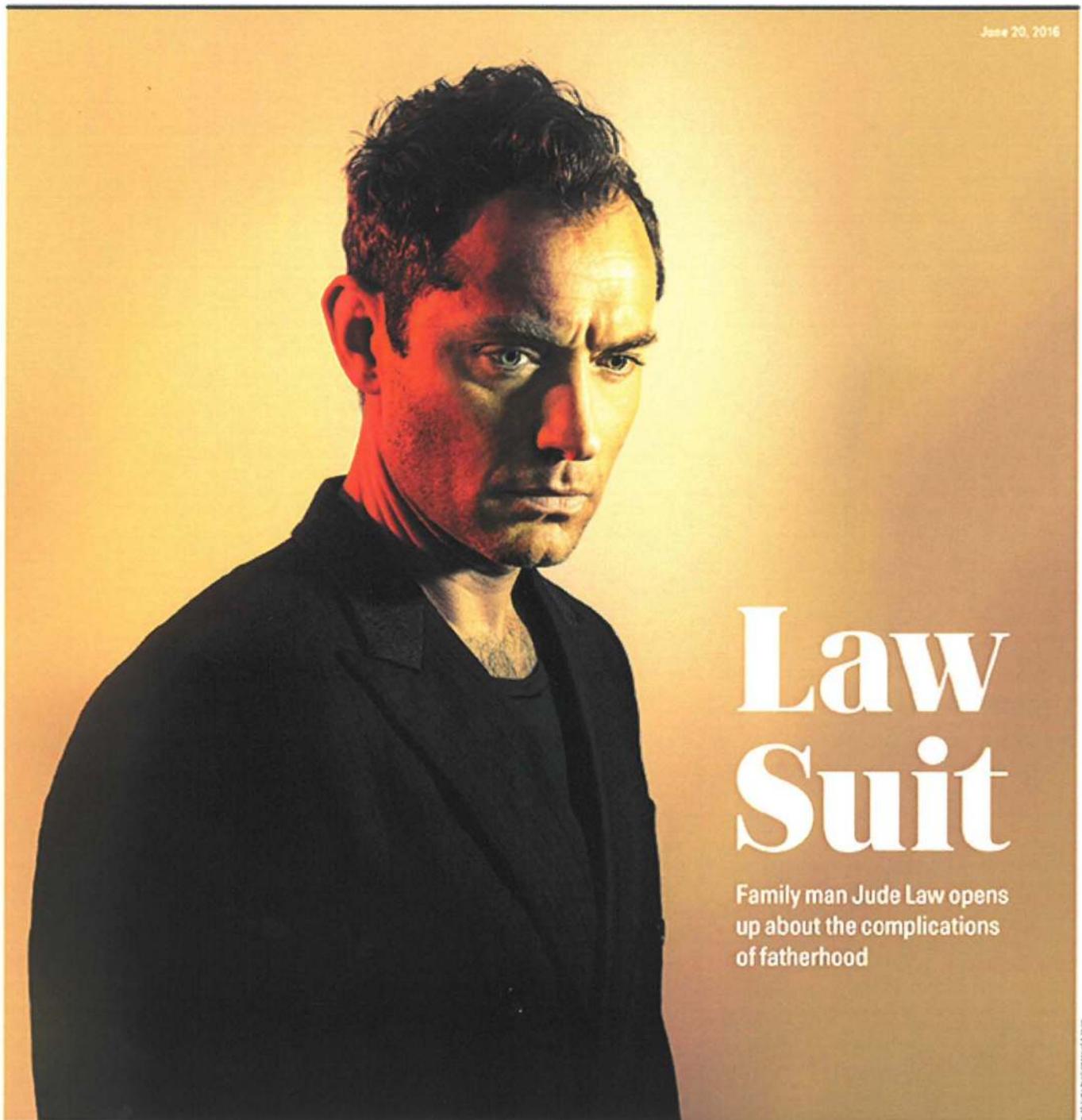
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# NEW YORK OBSERVER

June 20, 2016



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## Think Before You Ink

Tattoo regret is on the rise, but removal technology is advancing fast with ever-better results

BY LAREN STOVER

**DR. SEUSS' PHILOSOPHICAL 1961 CHILDREN'S** story *The Sneetches* is about tattoos and tattoo removal as much as it is about status and discrimination. Yellow creatures with a green star on their bellies enjoy an elevated status until plain-bellied Sneetches start stamping green stars on themselves with an ingenious "Star-On" machine. That's when the original, elite star-bellied Sneetches began to have star regret. Star eradication using a special "Star-Off" machine costs three times more than the cost of getting the mark, and they happily pay the price to be special. This goes on until everyone ends up broke.

Once upon a time, pretty much only sailors got inked by choice. (A clever way to identify a sailor's body should he be lost at sea.) Then it caught on with circus folk, bikers, convicts, gang members...and finally the rest of us. According to a 2016 Harris Poll study of 2,000 Americans, more than 1 in 4 adults (27 percent) has at least one tattoo and many eventually get buyer's remorse. Tattoo regret is big. It's most common when the love of your life—who has gotten under your skin with questionable, non-FDA-approved ingredients such as lead, zinc, heavy metals and PETA's taboo list including charred animal bones, beetles and glycerin derived from animal fat—turns out not to be, after all. Celebrities with tattoo regret have been making headlines ever since Angelina Jolie deleted "Billy Bob" from her shoulder after her divorce from the *Sling Blade* actor in 2003. Victoria Beckham has been lasering a wrist tattoo as well as erasing the Hebrew phrase "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" that runs down her back. When the former Posh Spice arrived at the opening gala of the Cannes Film Festival recently, the *Daily Mail* reported, "Her once garish tattoos [were] nearly faded away entirely."

Khloe Kardashian posted her "daddy" tramp stamp removal with a Los Angeles



The Enlighten offers the fastest light technology, effective for even deep blue and green tattoo fading.

dermatologist on Instagram last September and received 226,000 likes within two hours. She commented, "I should've listened to Kim when she told me, 'You don't put a bumper sticker on a Bentley.'"

Like the "Star-Off" machine of Dr. Seuss, tattoo removal is much more expensive than getting inked. But unlike the "Star-Off" machine, there is more than one treatment, and there might be residual traces and possibly scarring. Enter the \$275,000 Enlighten by Cutera, the world's first dual wavelength and dual-pulse duration laser system for removing tattoos of all colors. The manufacturer claims it offers "industry-leading power, treatment depth and speed for the most efficient and complete tattoo removal results."

Dr. Paul Jarrod Frank of Fifth Avenue Dermatology Surgery & Laser Center is one of the three dermatologists in New York with the new technology. "We have yet to create the magic wand, meaning that if you have a tattoo to erase, there's still no magic way to erase it," said Dr. Frank, who has also tried out a slightly older machine called the PicoSure and returned it. "Newer technologies are out now. But it's still overall a costly and very time consuming and uncomfortable process."

Not as uncomfortable as it used to be, according to Samantha, 33, a medical technician who went to Dr. Frank to remove from her ankle

the five-letter name of her ex-boyfriend she got when she was 22. She did the first five treatments with MedLite, an older machine (also used to treat scars and wrinkles) that operates in nanoseconds, before being treated with Enlighten, which operates in picoseconds, shorter and more effective pulses at one trillionth of a second. "It was helping, but when he got the new machine, it took only two treatments to remove it completely," she said. "It didn't hurt as much, and the healing process didn't take as long."

Is she getting her new beau's name tattooed? "No, you can only make that mistake once," she said.

Why does the Enlighten have two wavelengths? Cutera's executive vice president of marketing, Jon Pearson, explains, "Some wavelengths, the shorter ones are good at removing red, orange and yellow, and the longer ones for darker colors such as black and dark blue. One laser wavelength is not effective on all ink colors—that's why you need more than one." He noted that green and royal blue, however, are tenacious.

"Unfortunately, the inks keep getting more permanent, brighter and better because tattoo artists want to make ink that stays beautiful longer," observed Dr. Frank.

"So they keep making their inks more powerful, and we keep trying to figure out ways to remove it."

COURTESY/CUTERA



FROM LEFT: CHECCO DE GIURE; WIREIMAGE; DAVE HOGAN; GETTY IMAGES

Above: Angelina Jolie in 2001 (left) and in 2010, after having work done on her Billy Bob Thornton tattoo. Below: Victoria Beckham in 2007 (left) and in 2016 after beginning tattoo-removal laser treatment.



FROM LEFT: ETHAN MILLER; GETTY IMAGES; GOSIA SCHUBEL; GETTY IMAGES

Enlighten is already working on technology with three wavelengths to more effectively remove a wider spectrum of colors.

Where does the ink go when a tattoo is blasted? "Through the lymphatic system," said Cutera's Pearson. "You know the game Pac-Man? When the tattoo ink is 'shattered,' these cells called phagocytes, cells that protect the body by ingesting harmful foreign particles, bacteria and dead cells, consume them and remove them from your body."

This raises the question: Are tattoos safe?

"You'd think there would be regulations because tattoo ink is placed into your skin where it resides," Pearson said. "One of the challenges with tattoo removal is that there is a whole broad spectrum of ingredients used, and they are not consistent. I'd be more concerned about the cleanliness of the tattoo guns."

Dr. Frank has observed immune reactions to ink resulting in scarring, lumping and bumping, as well as allergic reactions to the ingredients. "You're putting a foreign body, a chemical into the skin. Skin doesn't like foreign chemicals," he said.

Then there's the quality of the art. "An overwhelming amount of tattoos are amateurish," said Dr. James Silberzweig, a Manhattan doctor who has the Enlighten and often removes tattoos on new parents who don't want their children to see them and be inspired to get their own.

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Before getting the machine he spent a day at a tattoo show in Queens. "It's fascinating to see what good work looks like," he said. "There really are artists, and the work they do is quite impressive."

Misspellings are also rampant. Dr. Sejal K. Shah of Smarter Skin Dermatology, who charges by the square inch, once erased the word Queen spelled with one "e" from an arm.

Pearson credits celebrities for the rise in tattoos. "If you go to the Whole Foods in the [San Francisco] Bay area, 100 percent of the people who work there—they're all sort of in that early-20s age range—have tattoos. Johnny Depp, the sexiest man alive, according to *People*, is cool, hip and modern, and look at all his."

But even Depp has had tattoo regret, laser-ing two letters from "Winona Forever" to read "Wino Forever."

Actors may not be hindered by body art, and it's even infiltrated the pristine ballet world. Russia's ballet "bad boy," the Ukrainian born Sergei Polunin, who has created a sensation with his intriguing body art, dances in all his tattooed glory in a music video directed by David LaChapelle. It has over 15 million views.

Stigmas persist, however. Even though the U.S. Marine Corps has just lightened up on its tattoo policy, Pearson says, "Forty percent of employers still have a bias against visible tattoos." And some of those tats tell stories



YOUTUBE

Above: Khloe Kardashian live streamed getting a tattoo removed on her web site. Below: her hand in 2015 (left) and 2016.



FROM LEFT: JIM SPELLMAN; WIREIMAGE; INALOR/INFLUENCER

worth erasing.

"It's pretty life changing for some people to have tattoos removed," said Dr. Shah, who has removed facial tear drops from former convicts and gang members during her residency and said that she found the Enlighten to be far superior to traditional lasers.

Dr. Frank is affiliated with a group that donates services to help former gang members assimilate into society and has treated people to remove tattooed on symbols of violence likely to hinder their acceptance into the mainstream workforce. His most challenging case? "A guy came in, in a wheelchair because he had a gunshot wound to the spine. And he had the biggest, bulbous, black ink I've ever seen—'Fuck you,' wrapped around his neck. I'm like, 'this is going to be tough to do a job like that.'"

"I've got nothing against tattoos," said Dr. Frank, who is considering getting a caduceus symbol on his ankle when he is 70. "I'll tell you what bothers me—I'll be in a room with a bunch of dermatologists. And they'll all be so anti-tattoos, like tattoos are the worst thing, but yet they've got no problem injecting fillers and Botox and doing laser on them. These are all forms of body modification. It's just another way people feel individualized about themselves—to feel special. For some people, it's Botox and lasers; for others, it's tattoos. Whatever floats their boat." ■