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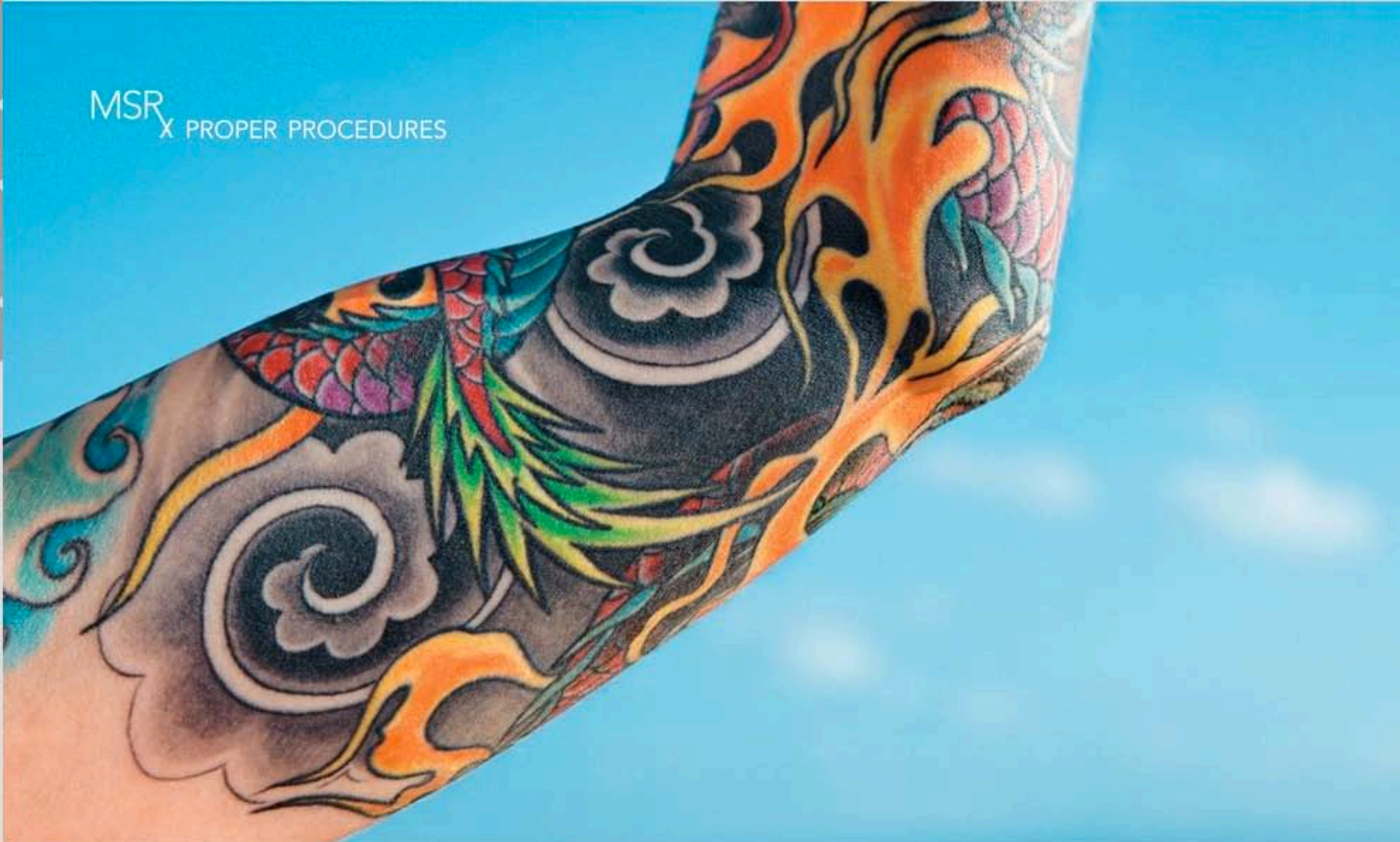
THE CHATWAL SPA BY KASHWÉRE (NEW YORK CITY)



Rethinking Inking

Mitchell Chasin, M.D., discusses the best ways to help clients remove permanent tattoos and get a fresh start.

LASER TATTOO REMOVAL HAS COME A long way in the past few years, as technology continues to improve and the demand for removal continues to grow. But technology is only part of the equation. Good decision-making and setting clear expectations are key to achieving satisfying results and happy patients. In the past, physicians have used carbon-dioxide lasers, pulse-dyed lasers, IPLs, and even dermabrasion to try to break up tattoo ink under the skin. Unfortunately, these *continued on page 52*



“Multi-colored tattoos can be treated using a variety of lasers on the same visit.”

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devices and procedures proved to have shortcomings, and poor ink clearance and scarring were often the result. These days, physicians are using an assortment of quality-switched laser devices (Q-switched lasers) to safely deliver energy into the skin to shatter tattoo ink, allowing the body's lymphatic system to methodically carry the particles away. A Q-switched laser emits short, high-power pulses, allowing a laser to produce a pulsed beam of light. The technique produces light pulses with very high power—much higher than would be produced by the same laser operating in a constant output (continuous wave) mode.

Matching Wavelengths and Ink Color

Q-switched lasers emit a unique wavelength of light energy, each of which is better absorbed by different colors of ink. Getting the best results for your client requires matching the right Q-switched laser and laser wavelength to their skin type and the color of their tattoo. Despite manufacturers' claims, there is no one laser that is equally effective for all tattoo colors and skin types. For example, if your client has a black tattoo, you'll want to use a 1064 nm Q-switched Nd:Yag laser. For green ink, a 755 nm Q-switched Alexandrite works best, and for red and yellow ink a 532 nm frequency doubled Q-switched

Nd:YAG is appropriate. Q-switched Ruby lasers work well for blue and green ink. The results can be further enhanced by combining Q-switched lasers with fractional lasers. Multicolored tattoos can be treated using a variety of lasers on the same visit, generally starting with the longer wavelengths first. For patients with darker skin, I've found that 1064 nm lasers are best tolerated. For cover-up tattoos with very dense ink, first use conservative levels of laser energy to prevent complications. Each Q-switched laser costs around \$80,000 to \$100,000, so doing tattoo removal the right way requires quite an investment. Be wary of inexpensive tabletop tattoo removal lasers, as they generally don't utilize a large enough spot size to get adequate penetration of energy, and scarring often results.

Setting Expectations

Most people don't understand what laser tattoo removal entails when they walk through the door. Many expect to receive one treatment and leave with clear skin and a fresh start. The reality of tattoo removal isn't nearly that simple, and it's important that the client understands how the process works. It takes many treatments over the course of many months to clear the ink, and there are no guarantees that the tattoo will be fully

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removed in the end. Setting clear expectations is key to keeping the patient satisfied through a long, expensive, and potentially painful series of treatments. Even when confronted with the realities of tattoo removal, most clients start treatment determined to get rid of their unwanted tattoo. The number of treatments it takes to clear a tattoo depends on the type of tattoo and color of ink(s). Professionally inked tattoos typically have multiple colors and take the most sessions to clear (usually six to 12 and possibly more), because the ink is injected at a high density and penetrated deeper into the skin. Amateur tattoos are usually easier to remove because they use less ink. These typically take two to six sessions to clear.

Permanent makeup usually takes one to three sessions to clear, because it uses less ink than professional tattoos, and the injections occur more superficially into the skin. Sometimes the cosmetologists who perform this unregulated beauty treatment use ink containing iron, which can turn blue when hit with laser energy, so testing a small spot before treatment is highly recommended.

Traumatic tattoos result from foreign matter being driven into the skin, such as when a motorcyclist has a spill on asphalt or the skin is punctured with a lead pencil. The number of treatments required to clear a traumatic tattoo can vary greatly—if they can be cleared by lasers at all—depending on what substances are embedded in the skin. Two to six treatments is a good place to start. For clients with medicinal tattoos, which are used to mark sites on the body for radiation treatment or for catheter placement, they often view it as a reminder of ill health that they want removed after recovery. These usually take just one or two treatments to erase.

Make sure your patients understand that they may need more or fewer sessions, depending on their specific tattoo. With all the formulations of ink and individual tattooing styles available, you never really know how long treatment will take until you have a few sessions under your belt. Treatments should be spaced at least six to eight weeks apart. Patients can go months between treatments without affecting the eventual outcome, and if patients insist on tanning during the summer, it is advisable to put laser tattoo removal on hold for this period, because

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having a tan can interfere with the delivery of energy and potentially lead to complications.

Learning to Say No

We all want to help our patients, but being a reputable tattoo removal specialist means saying “no” if your client isn’t a good candidate. If your laser isn’t the ideal device to remove a patient’s tattoo based on the color(s) of the ink and their skin type, it is best to refer them to a practitioner who owns the best laser(s) for the job. Perhaps the patient has a history of keloid scarring, had an allergic reaction when they got the tattoo, or have dark skin and a red, pink, and yellow tattoo. It’s best to advise against laser tattoo removal in these and many other circumstances. Also be wary of tattoos with white or tan ink, as they may turn permanently brown or black when hit by the laser. Another reason to say no is when clients have unreasonable expectations. It’s vital to be clear about the costs, time commitment, and discomfort with your patients at the outset so there are no surprises down the road. If a patient is not satisfied with the realities of tattoo removal, it is best for both of you not to treat him or her. Being successful at tattoo removal is all about finding the perfect fit, investing in the right equipment, finding the right patients, and matching the laser to the ink. If you are able to achieve all of those steps, you will have a loyal patient and a good referral, and your practice will thrive.—*Mitchell Chasin, M.D.*

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