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## **A PIERCING LOOK AT EARS**

Ear piercing and, in general, body piercing has passed through the fetish stage and is now considered fashion, and by most standards, high fashion. It has become mainstream and is the sign of the times.

The concept of decorating the body is ancient history. Nose rings were worn throughout the Middle East and by tribal groups like the Berbers as a sign of wealth and status.<sup>1</sup> Today's society rewards shock value with dollars, thereby making piercing an economic business opportunity of enormous potential. Piercing is everywhere, not just in San Francisco or New York. At a recent Buffalo Bills game, fan and players alike flaunted multiple earrings; kids roam through malls across the U.S. sporting hoops from the very top of their ears to the bottom lobe; and models like Stella Tennant stare out from Versace couture ads with conspicuous nose rings.<sup>2</sup> When you look back over history, every period is connected to some sort of body modification, whether its plastic surgery and breast implants of the eighties or the corsets of the Victorian times. The idea of falsely enhancing your beauty is human.<sup>3</sup>

This new fashion trend raises some interesting questions:

- How is the industry coping with the need to protect employees and the consumers from the transmission of bacteria and bloodborne viruses?
- Is the manufacturing sector producing piercing instruments that reflect the needs of society?
- Are retailers geared up to meet the demands of our regulatory agencies?
- Are consumers informed of the possible hazards of piercing and of the steps manufacturers are taking to minimize hazardous exposure?

This article will address the subject of ear piercing. It will attempt to answer some of these questions and may raise other questions of equal importance.

Greater than one million people in the United States carry the hepatitis B virus (HBV) in their bloodstream. Another 300,000 people, mostly young adults, are infected each year through contact with the blood or body fluids of a person who carries the virus.<sup>4</sup> There are five known types of hepatitis

including B, type A (HAV), type C (HCV), type D (HDV), and type E (HEV). Of the known types, HBV, HCV and HDV are known to be transmitted via percutaneous/per mucosal exposure to blood or blood products and sexual contact.<sup>5</sup> Hepatitis B (HBV) can be controlled with antibiotics whereas HIV, HCV and HDV cannot. AIDS is an infection transmitted by a virus, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). From the perspective of skin piercing, HIV is transmitted in the same way as HBV.

The measures that are used to prevent transmission of these viruses are universal precautions. In fact, they are mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).<sup>6</sup> They affect many workers where occupational exposure may occur (under bloodborne pathogens standard) including acute care centers, blood banks, dentists and physicians offices, funeral services, law enforcement, ear piercing and body piercing establishments, and other occupations where possible exposure to blood may occur.

A bloodborne pathogens standard was issued by the OSHA to protect more than 5.6 million workers and prevent 200 deaths and 9,200 bloodborne infections each year.<sup>7</sup> The standard requires employers to establish a written exposure control plan, identifying workers with occupational exposure to blood and other potentially infectious material and specifying means to protect and train them. It calls for engineering controls such as puncture-resistant containers for used needles; work practices such as hand washing to reduce contamination; and appropriate personal protective equipment such as gowns and gloves.

A study of various ear piercing methods on the market in 1990<sup>8</sup> showed that contamination with blood or serum on the instruments used was possible, with risk of spreading infection between the consumer and practitioners. It is interesting to note that blood or serum does not have to be visible on the instrument or needle to transmit infection.<sup>9</sup>

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates the blood industry through a blood safety system that starts at the blood collection center and extends to manufacturers and distributors of blood products. The FDA strives to keep the blood supply safe by decreasing the risk of infectious disease transmission. As technology develops and new information about the transmission of infectious diseases becomes available, FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research issues written guidance to all blood establishments, licensed (interstate) and unlicensed (intrastate). This guidance sets the standard

for the industry and is incorporated into standard operating procedures for all blood facilities.<sup>10</sup> For example, an FDA memo dated 4/23/95 states prospective donors shall be deferred from donating blood or blood components for transfusion who, within the preceding 12 months, have a history of: 1) a tattoo; 2) mucous membrane exposure to blood; 3) nonsterile skin penetration with instruments or equipment contaminated with blood or body fluids; 4) sexual or household contact with an individual with viral hepatitis. (Standards B2.621, B2.622, B2.624).

Persons who have had any contact with blood and body fluids through percutaneous inoculation (such as injury or accidental needlestick) or through contact with an open wound, non-intact skin or mucous membrane during the preceding 12 months should be deferred. (FDA Memo 4/23/92). With respect to ear piercing and body piercing, blood banks are able to allow exception to the above standards. Acceptance by blood banks of written documentation from the practitioner and the manufacturer of piercing instruments stating that a sterile, disposable, single-use system has been employed, for example, to pierce ears will provide the acceptance of the donor by the blood banks.

Although these facts may sound alarming, piercing is rarely dangerous when performed by competent professionals. Gemstone Jewelry, Inc., The Piercing Professionals, operates more than 120 stores in strategic shopping malls across the United States. The innovative founder of Gemstone Jewelry (Emmaus, PA), Mr. Ronald A. Weaver (President and CEO), has recently taken this fast growing chain of stores and introduced an ear piercing system which epitomizes the technological advances of the 90's, BLOMDAHL the Medical Ear Piercing system.<sup>11</sup>

BLOMDAHL the Medical System gives maximum protection to the employer, employees, and consumer against transmission of bloodborne viruses. BLOMDAHL the Medical System is in compliance with regulatory needs by using a totally encapsulated cassette that has been sterilized. It is manufactured to ensure sterile ear piercing since only the disposable cassette, never the piercing instrument, makes contact with the consumers ear.

We have seen ear and body piercing become the number one sales category for many of our retail and salon customers, states Jeff Irvin, President of Pacific Piercing Supply. Our company has been in the piercing industry for over eight years. During that time, our staff and trainers have performed over 500,000 piercings, providing us with a great deal of insight into this business. We are currently upgrading

our products and techniques, always taking a medical approach to piercing. Most suppliers are only concerned with price and fashion. While these are important, they should by no means be the primary concern when addressing a medical procedure such as ear and body piercing. Our company's foremost concern is for the safety of the piercer and their client. This sentiment is shared by our customers also, as they strive for customer satisfaction and limited liability.

We have literally searched the world over for ear piercing systems and have found the Blomdahl Medical Piercing System to be the safest, most advanced system today. This unique system is the only choice for professional piercers and safety minded customers.<sup>12</sup>

In general, though, it is interesting to note that the ear piercing/body piercing business represents a growing market in excess of one billion dollars per year and is still dominated by piercing methodologies that date back twentyfive years and more. Piercing no longer represents the marks of Hells Angels or punk rockers; everyone from supermodels to sports stars to college students is taking part in this new body art. Fashion has changed, so must industry.

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