

BEAUTY ENQUIRER

Think before you ink

A teenage rebellion led *Jess Lacey* to have a tattoo – but then she changed her mind. Here, she comes clean and trials the latest technology in laser removal

IT'S MY EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY and I'm bent over a chair, arms wrapped around the back of the headrest, fingernails gripping in response to the pain. Through the tiny gap in the polythene curtains I can just about make out the overweight man in the cubicle next to me wincing as the third dwarf starts to take shape on his shoulder. He has four more to go.

I'm supposed to be en route to a white-linen-tablecloth luncheon being thrown by my adoring parents in my honour. It's to be a celebration of my reaching adulthood – as I sit in the tattoo parlour the irony is entirely lost on me. I eventually arrive 30 minutes late with cling film wrapped around my middle, seeped in dried blood and unable to bend. Nothing says bored, ungrateful teenager like a dodgy tattoo.

Oddly enough I don't regret my 'ink' – a six-inch-wide generic Maori design on my lower back that seemed awfully creative at the time. It's a reminder that I was once brave enough (OK, stupid enough) to go to the extreme, something I'm far too self-conscious to manage today. The rebellion was unnecessary and unoriginal but, to give myself credit, I followed through.

However, this hasn't stopped me hating it every day for the past 12 years. As soon as I expose my lower back you



can barely count to three before there's a gasp followed by the exclamation, 'I didn't expect YOU to have a tattoo!' This wounds twofold: one, it's confirmation of how tacky it truly is; two, I'm considered far too sensible to have ever been reckless. Yet my argument has always been that until technology advances to a point where it can be licked off by kittens, my 'tramp stamp' remains.

Alas, the kittens haven't yet surfaced, but last June, something else did. Nine years in the making, the PicoSure, made by laser giant Cynosure, emerged and made a generational leap in tattoo-removal technology. There are countless lasers that claim to remove tattoos, but most exchange ink for scarring and require at least 20 sessions. The PicoSure gets its name from the time it takes to deliver pulsed bursts of energy to the skin – a picosecond, which is a trillionth of a second. The laser beam breaks the tattoo-ink particles into tiny pieces using pressure waves, which are much more easily absorbed by the body. Put into layman's terms, if you think of pigment particles like rocks under your skin, the more commonly used Q-switched laser

could break them down into pebbles, but the PicoSure breaks them down into sand. Developed in the US, the first chain of skin clinics in Europe to get the machine is Trueskin Medispa. And I'm signed up.

I lie down on the treatment bed with protective glasses securely on as Holly Faulkner, my aesthetician, aims a laser at my back. The first jolt catches me out – I had no idea how powerful it would be and I jerk with the volt. The pain is a scorching sensation and I think I might throw up. I'm squirming and will only allow her two zaps each time, so the treatment takes 20 minutes, rather than the predicted five. Holly says I actually coped well; she's treated a professional fighter who said he'd rather be knocked out than suffer the laser. However, in the two months Trueskin has owned the machine, patients have flown in from all over Europe and even as far as Africa for treatment. Some weeks they have 100 appointments, so there must be something in it.

The PicoSure immediately turns my tattoo white, as if it's been frosted. It's covered with a bandage, and I'm told to keep it away from water for 24 hours and ▶

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apply aloe vera. I waddle out with the residual heat smouldering in my skin, but the next morning the pain has dulled to sunburn level and over the next week the area scabs over. I can't see any change, but I know there's a fair way to go yet.

Six weeks later, I'm back at Trueskin for my second treatment and, having dosed myself up with painkillers and two thick coats of Emla numbing cream, I'm prepared. It's all over in a fraction of the time and I feel nothing more than the sensation of a bikini wax, but it doesn't escape me how much trauma I am putting my body through. I'm in this situation entirely of my own doing.

I speak to friends who also have tattoos: the consensus seems to be that if you can conceal it, it's not really a big deal and they'd need a more pressing motivation to have theirs removed. Case in point, Drew Barrymore is currently having all her tattoos zapped off so she can convert to Judaism (the Torah dictates Jews should not mark their bodies). Similarly, a friend of mine had hers removed after accepting a job in Japan, where they're considered a symbol of gang culture. In fact, of the 20 million tattooed adults in the UK, it's estimated one in five suffers from 'tattoo regret'. So why are more people being inked than ever before?

'It's bonkers, but it's trendy to have tattoos now,' says Nikole Lowe, tattooist at I Love Good Times. 'When I started out 14 years ago, people wanted them in hidden places, but now it's about having them on show.'

And it's no surprise that the rise in tattoos among young people is largely due to celebrities: Cara Delevingne defied the model code and got inked on her hands, Rihanna has 19 to date, and Harry Styles has racked up 50 in less than two years.

But what about people whose lives are more conventional? Wayne Joyce, co-founder of the Reset Room (resetroom.com) and considered to be the top 'tattoo removalist' in London, tells me he's been using the PicoSure on the most unexpected people: 'A number of clients come to me because they can't get jobs with their tattoos. Then I had an influx of city people following work Christmas parties. They'd been in cocktail dresses or short sleeves and their bosses had clocked their tattoos, telling them to remove them.' Of course that's illegal, but body art often

reverse their decision; as the demand for tattoos rises, so does the need for removal. When I question Joyce if his removal studio – set in the same premises as The Circle, Soho's oldest tattoo parlour – gives the impression tattoos are easily reversed, he tells me absolutely not: 'I'm here in a tattoo parlour not to make it look easy to go back on your decision, but because I'm on the ground floor understanding the application and techniques. If I understand how the tattoo was done, maybe I can undo it better.' He's keen to get the point across that laser removal is a serious procedure



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jars with the work culture, giving a bad impression to clients.

The good news is that the resurgence of tattoos brings a new wave of creativity along with it, and increasing numbers of tattooists have a background in fine art. Rihanna's tattoos were created by Cally-Jo, a graduate of Winchester School of Art, and David Dumbleby's scorpion tattoo was the work of Paul Hill, previously a motorbike airbrush artist. Two years ago, Hill teamed up with graphic designer Rebecca Morris to found Vagabond Tattoo Studio in Hackney (iamvagabond.co.uk). He says: 'We take a fresh angle on tattoos and lose the scary image of the tattoo parlour. There's more of a design-led approach to tattoos now and clients come with their own concept; each tattoo is bespoke.'

But as arty as these new tattoos are, there will always be those who, like me, want to

with consequences and the results aren't always what you wish for, so you need to think about it.

I'm now four PicoSure treatments down the line and, although there's been significant fading, my tattoo is still with me. It's a long process, but I'm sticking with it because I believe that by next summer, I'll be ink free. That said, laser removal should never be an incentive to have a tattoo in the first place, because even if it's relatively affordable (PicoSure starts at £199 per session), you can never guarantee the end result. Hill puts it perfectly when he adds, 'You wouldn't get married thinking, "I can always get divorced," and it's the same with body art – you shouldn't rely on the get-out clause.' ■

Visit Picosure.com for more information. For an appointment at Trueskin, see trueskin.co.uk. Prices vary according to tattoo size.

Makeshift cover stars

The temporary cover-ups that let you to choose who you show your body art to, and when...



1. Cover FX Cream Concealer, £23

This was originally designed by a top dermatologist to hide his patients' acne and surgery scars. And we've yet to find an imperfection it doesn't conceal.

2. Diego Dalla Palma Calze Spray, £20

Spray-on tights that instantly perfect skin tone and veil everything – including tattoos – with an even 15-denier-type glow. A must-have product, even if you aren't inked.

3. MAC Face and Body Foundation, £27

A water-resistant, sweat-proof base found in pretty much every make-up artist's kit for bruises, bumps and models with body art.

4. Vichy Dermablend Total Body Corrective Foundation, £29.75

Hi-tech iron oxides bond to the skin, ensuring a 16-hour hold and zero rub-off on your clothes. Plus, it's completely non-comedogenic, so won't clog pores or cause irritation.

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