

HEALTHY LIVING SPOTLIGHT

QueensCare Next Step Tattoo Removal Program

By Rosemarie Ashamalla, Ph.D.

Every Tuesday morning at QueensCare Family Clinic East Los Angeles, an upbeat group of people gather swathed in plastic and anesthetic cream. They are that week's candidates for low cost/no cost laser tattoo removal through QueensCare's unique Next Step program. And they are upbeat because they know that they are taking a step towards a brighter future for themselves and their families.

As Los Angeles focuses increasingly on prevention and intervention efforts for its at-risk populations, QueensCare has been quietly combating urban violence and substance abuse through Next Step for the past 7 years. Those accepted into the program must submit a letter of referral from a counselor or law enforcement official. Most of the candidates for tattoo removal are exiting a gang lifestyle, in recovery for substance abuse, or victims of domestic violence.

A typical gathering of patients each week might include Robert, who left the gang lifestyle behind years ago to become a hard-working husband and father, but who worries that his old gang tattoos might endanger his children when he walks with them. Anna, mother of a 3-year-old, decided to get a referral to the program when she saw her young child drawing on herself in order to "be like Mommy." Frank is a former substance abuser, now a drug counselor, who wishes to set a good example for his clients – he has arrived with two new tattoo removal patients who are currently in residential recovery. Jason has been removing gang-related tattoos he put on as a young teenager as part of his goal to become a probation officer. Jason recently graduated from CSULB with his bachelor's degree.

Removing tattoos is a lengthy and painful process. Most large tattoos require 6 – 10 laser sessions for complete removal, with a substantial amount of time in between to allow the skin time to recover. Lidocaine cream, applied 2 hours prior to the treatment, can numb the pain somewhat, but by all accounts it is far more painful to remove a tattoo than it is to get one. QueensCare patients come for sessions every 8 weeks, most will need treatment for over a year, and over the course of time they get to know others in the program. The energy of people moving towards a productive future free from stigma abounds. The atmosphere is one of empowerment, encouragement, and hope. During the course of a year, QueensCare's Next Step will serve 300-400 patients.

The demand is far greater. Throughout the city, the few low cost/no cost programs that exist can serve only a fraction of those in need. Many are dependent on short-term funding sources and do not survive beyond a year or two. Others are very small in scope, serving less than 50 people per year. QueensCare, along with Jobs for a Future, the

Hollywood-Sunset Clinic, and Holy Cross Hospital in Mission Hills, is one of the main providers of this service for all of Los Angeles County.

The alternative to these programs, to seek private assistance from a physician skilled in laser-tattoo removal, is cost-prohibitive for most people. Typical costs for a session range from \$150-250 dollars, and the amount of area covered for this price is limited. It could easily cost from \$2000 - \$3000 to fully remove a 4 inch square tattoo, and the price for multiple tattoos would be astronomical.

QueensCare's Next Step Program partners with multiple nonprofits and law enforcement entities in the area, both for referral letters and as resources to help our patients. Most notable among these is the El Monte Police Community Relations Office, which raised a substantial donation in 2002, allowing QueensCare to purchase its own state-of-the-art laser. The El Monte Police Department believes strongly in prevention and intervention programs, and has an entire building devoted to finding young people employment, tattoo removal, mentoring, and other programs keeping youth productive and out of gangs.

Other important partners for QueensCare include substance abuse recovery centers such as: Latino Family Center, which does treatment in 4 residential homes as well as on an outpatient basis; Delancy Street, which does long-term residential care, and Prototypes, which specializes in treatment for battered women and provides residential treatment for women with children in need of family housing, among many others.

Recently, the Los Angeles City Council commissioned The Advancement Project, headed by noted civil rights attorney Connie Rice, to develop a comprehensive plan for combating gang violence within the city. Their recently released report spoke eloquently about the need for more prevention and intervention as well as the need for more coordination between agencies. The report was likened to a "Marshall Plan for gangs" and the need was cited to locate an independent funding stream so that prevention and intervention programs could serve all those in need. Until that dream can be realized, it is programs such as QueensCare's Next Step which provide help and hope to those fortunate enough to have been admitted.