



## WORKPLACE TABOOS

# Tattoos and Piercings in the Veterinary Profession

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**T**he year is turning from 2024 to 2025, and just about everywhere we go we see people with visible tattoos and piercings: the gas station, the grocery store, and yes, even in the healthcare field, including the veterinary clinic. In the past, tattoos and piercings have held a stigma and been associated with a lower-class status and lack of professionalism. That stigma has changed throughout the 2000s. Tattoos and piercings are both becoming more of a cultural norm and more commonly seen throughout the workplace.



As workplaces become more lenient on uniform policy and allow employees to show visible piercings and tattoos, is there a line beyond when it is too much? Are most employees and clients OK with seeing visible piercings and tattoos? Are their feelings toward piercings and tattoos based on stigmas from the past or concerns about the care of their animal in these professionals' hands?

## PROS AND CONS OF TATTOOS AND PIERCINGS IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION

The best thing about tattoos is that they have no chance of causing bodily injury. Clients or other coworkers may have differing opinions about their presence, but no tattoo is going to cause an employee or patient to be injured while at work. Piercings, on the other hand, do have the potential to cause bodily harm when working with animals. Dangling earrings, facial piercings, piercings below the neck, or even large gauges with holes have the potential to be caught by an animal during restraint or on something else in the workplace (e.g., fluid lines, tables). For safety reasons, veterinary clinics should have rules or guidelines for the size of jewelry due to the obvious safety implications for both staff and patients alike.

Tattoos and piercings are also sometimes considered distracting by owners and coworkers. For example, facial piercings that are touched when communicating with owners can be distracting to the client and may appear unhygienic. At the end of the day, the greatest negative aspect of having tattoos and piercings in the veterinary workplace is the judgment made by the people seeing them. Clients who do not like seeing tattoos and piercings may write a negative review about the clinic or staff member on their social media page or as a Google review. Alternatively, they may verbally tell friends and family not to go to that clinic, creating negative word-of-mouth marketing related to the clinic.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DEEMED INAPPROPRIATE?

Just because your clinic allows visible tattoos and piercings doesn't mean it shouldn't have established rules and guidelines. Any tattoo that is racist or gang-related or features profanity or nudity should be banned from being visible in a clinic. These tattoos not only represent poor character values for individuals but also are clearly unprofessional. Additionally, for



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piercings, location and choice of jewelry size should still remain somewhat unobtrusive in a clinic setting. At the end of the day, veterinary team members are at the clinic to treat animals that are often sick and injured, and patient safety should remain the top priority.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR CLINIC MANAGEMENT

For clinics that currently have policies in place banning visible tattoos and piercings, the clinic management team should check the rationale behind the policy. Beyond a certain limit, these policies can restrict an individual's self-expression. Clinics should consider moving beyond restrictive "blanket" anti-tattoo and anti-piercing policies and instead consider addressing tattoos and piercings on a case-by-case basis. One approach is to provide guidelines for what is and isn't appropriate in the workplace. This will allow employees to show self-expression in the workplace while reserving the right for clinics to still control what is considered professional and not targeting specific individuals without cause.

## ARE ATTITUDES TOWARD TATTOOS AND PIERCINGS CHANGING?

When the author first started working for Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine 7 years ago, the dress code policy was written as follows: "No visible body piercings (with the exception of ears) are allowed. Ear disks, gauges, plugs, or other stretched-type piercings are not acceptable. Visible tattoos are not permitted. All tattoos must be covered when working in the veterinary teaching hospital."

Over the years, that policy has changed to the following: "Staff shall not wear long, hooped, or dangling jewelry, including piercings, for safety purposes when working with animals."



## Perspectives on Tattoos and Piercings from Veterinary Nurses



**Hanna Yagel**, RVT, VTS (ECC), SSG in the Army Reserve, 68T Animal Care Specialist

“My tattoos are important to me because they allow me to have a daily reminder of the most important people and animals in my life. It also allows me to have daily reminders of why I’m still here, from the quotes to simple designs.”



**Megan Brashear**, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC)

“My tattoos represent very important times in my life and are a reminder of where I’ve been and what I’ve learned. They have also been conversation starters with clients (a good way to find common ground and sometimes bring people out of their shell).”



**Tami Lind**, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC)

“My tattoos signify a period in my life of what is important to me and something that makes me happy. It is a way to commemorate a point in time as well as something to express myself because I’m not great at expressing my feelings. I also just really love the art. I also hope one day when I’m in a nursing home that the nurses can smile at all the tattoos.”

This change in policy over less than a decade illustrates the change in perception happening within veterinary medicine and society as a whole. The stigma associated with visible tattoos and piercings is fading away, and they are becoming increasingly more socially accepted. If policies can be changed to encourage staff to feel like their most authentic selves and promote self-expression, it may increase workplace positivity and create employee retention by making individuals feel their self-expression is valued.

To better gauge sentiment on visible tattoos and piercings in the veterinary workplace, the author conducted an informal survey by sharing a link to several veterinary and nonveterinary social media pages. Questions ranged from “Do you have any tattoos yourself and why are they important to you?” to “Are you less likely to have someone examine your personal pet if they have tattoos and visible facial piercings?” By the time of publication, 338 individuals (roughly half veterinary professionals and half not) had completed the survey, and the results were clear: The majority of participants were OK with veterinary professionals having visible tattoos and/or piercings.

A review of the literature regarding patient perceptions of tattoos in human health care yields similar results. Despite some studies based on hypothetical situations showing a negative view,<sup>1</sup> patients overall tended to lean toward being OK with being treated by practitioners and nurses who had tattoos. In 1 study, 75 patients completed a questionnaire that asked if being treated by a dentist who had visible tattoos would make them uncomfortable.<sup>2</sup> A total of 92% of the participants said they would feel comfortable with having a dentist who had visible tattoos.<sup>2</sup>

In another study, 3 female and 4 male emergency clinicians agreed to wear temporary body art during their work shift.<sup>3</sup> The physicians wore an arm tattoo, facial piercing, both, or none. After patients interacted with 1 of the clinicians, a nurse would conduct a survey with the patient to evaluate their perception of the physician’s professionalism and competency, as well as trustworthiness and reliability. Out of the 924 interactions, ratings of the clinicians were not affected by their body art.<sup>3</sup>

Students, who represent a younger generation, also seem to be accepting of human healthcare practitioners with visible tattoos, regardless of whether they themselves have a tattoo or not.<sup>4</sup>

## SUMMARY

Ultimately, a tattoo or piercing has no effect on a veterinary professional's knowledge, but it can affect their sense of self-expression and how they are perceived by clients and coworkers. The author was trained by extremely intelligent female veterinary technician specialists in emergency and critical care who have body art. Their ability to teach, demonstrate skills, and show compassion and understanding to their coworkers and patients remains unaffected by having visible tattoos. **TVN**

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### Rachel Yoquelet

Rachel earned her Bachelor of Science degree in veterinary technology from Purdue University in 2017. In 2021, she achieved her VTS credential in emergency and critical care. Rachel has a passion for caring for critically ill patients and strives to help them maintain comfort, decrease overall pain, and increase their mobility during hospitalization. In 2022, Rachel earned her certification in veterinary massage and rehabilitation therapy from the Healing Oasis Wellness Center. She currently works full time in the physical rehabilitation department at Purdue University and helps teach rotating veterinary nursing students the fundamentals of physical rehabilitation.



  
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