

Schoolies warned over unsterile DIY tattooing and piercings

School leavers run the risk of returning from Schoolies Week with viral hepatitis if they expose themselves to unsterile tattooing and body piercing equipment that carries the blood-borne virus.

The warning coincides with the National Hepatitis Health Promotion conference being held in Sydney this week where a new kit that educates young Australians about the danger of hepatitis will be revealed.

A sharp rise in the availability of DIY tattooing and piercing kits, as well as an increase in the number of young Australians travelling to South East Asia, has prompted Hepatitis Australia to issue a warning about the dangers of blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis C - a serious disease for which no preventive vaccine is available.

"Schoolies Week is a time of celebration – it would be a tragedy if this is spoiled by people not being aware of the hidden dangers of sharing tattooing, piercing and injecting equipment," said Kevin Marriott, Acting CEO of Hepatitis Australia.

"By and large, tattooing practices in Australia are professional and safe, however an explosion in backyard tattooing and DIY piercing kits and the popularity of having tattoos in places like Bali are causing concern.

"Hygiene and sterilisation practices cannot be guaranteed unless tattoos and piercings are performed in a registered and reputable establishment. If you are going to get a tattoo or piercing, have it done professionally," he added.

Research has shown that the use of unsterile tattoo needles and dipping of needles in tattoo ink that has been previously used is associated with a higher risk of hepatitis C infection.¹ Another major risk factor for hepatitis C is sharing injecting equipment.

Around 227,000 Australians are estimated to have hepatitis C and almost 50,000 have moderate to severe liver disease.²

The National Hepatitis Health Promotion Conference: Breaking through the Barriers, is being held in Sydney over two days from the 14th November. The conference brings together experts and health and community workers to share and discuss strategies and programs responding to viral hepatitis in Australia.

Infection with hepatitis C may not be apparent straight away. The symptoms of hepatitis C can take years to emerge, however liver damage can silently progress. Left untreated hepatitis C can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer and liver failure.

"No school leaver should come home with a disease that they may have to live with for the rest of their life. The message is simple: do not run the risk of hepatitis C by exposing yourself to unsterile tattooing and body piercing or by sharing injecting equipment," Mr Marriott added.

Schoolies can learn how to love their liver at www.loveyourliver.com.au

Ends#

For further information or to arrange an interview please contact Fiona Beveridge (0405 902 826) or Jay Pleass (0412 623 578) at Ethical Strategies on 02 8904 7300.

References:

1. Jafari S, *et al.* Tattooing and the risk of transmission of hepatitis C: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*. July 31, 2010
2. The Kirby Institute. HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections in Australia Annual Surveillance Report 2012.