

Online tattoo guns trigger health risks

» FABIAN DI LIZIA

It is a dangerous combination with permanent consequences – a few beers, a few mates and a tattoo gun bought on eBay.

Electricity lineman Jack McMahon has used his tattoo gun on himself about a dozen times – and does not intend to stop.

"You just get a few beers into you and have a go with it," the 22-year-old from North Richmond said.

He is one of the many young people buying tattoo guns on the internet and becoming tattooists.

Dozens of online shopping websites are selling tattoo guns in Australia: eBay and MyShopping have more than 3000 listings for "tattoo kit", with bidding starting at \$15.

But tattoo parlours have reported an increase in the number of clients requiring repair work after DIY tattoos, as health experts warn of the risks of transmitting disease.

Mr McMahon said he used tattoo guns "just for a fiddle".

He has about nine tattoos on his lower legs and three on his thighs that he did himself.

"I've also done some on my mates," he said. "When we are bored, we will pull out the gun."

But Mr McMahon has also attempted to have eight of his self-made tattoos fixed by professionals. Student Nick Schiller has also played around with tattoo guns.

"One weekend, we went down the south coast on a surfing trip," the 24-year-old said. "A mate had a tattoo gun and we had a couple of wines. I then got a tattoo on my bum. It is a picture of a guy surfing and his ruffe finger is sticking up near my butt crack."

Tattoo artist Lowie Barbot, of the Toru Summit tattoo studio in Balmain, estimated 15 per cent of his business was covering up tattoos.

"People come in all the time attempting to have their tattoos fixed," Mr Barbot said. "I had a girl

come in just this week. She had the whole side of her calf done and it looked horrid... She was not very happy when I told her it would cost \$600 to \$800 to fix that."

Some of those customers were under 18, he said.

Tattoo removal costs about \$250 per five square centimetres.

Bondi Ink owner Wendy Tadross said "hundreds" of young people had come into her tattoo parlour this year looking to have tattoos fixed.

It is legal to buy tattoo guns online without restrictions on age or qualifications, although it is illegal to tattoo a child without parental consent, even if no payment is made.

Last year, anyone performing tattoos for a fee or reward in NSW was required to apply for a licence with NSW Fair Trading. An individual tattooist licence costs \$699 for three years and a licence for those operating a tattoo business costs \$2094 for three years.

Qualifications for tattoo artists practising vary from state to state but generally involve meeting health requirements, including strict hygiene and sterilisation measures.

Health experts fear tattoos done at home also pose health risks if equipment is reused and not sterilised.

"Transmission of hepatitis C and other blood-borne diseases including hepatitis B and HIV is possible when poor infection control practices are used during tattooing or piercing," said blood diseases expert Lisa Maher, of the Kirby Institute.

The Department of Fair Trading said that "the minister does not intend to change laws related to tattoo guns and online sales".

Opposition fair trading spokeswoman Tania Mihailuk called on the government to "immediately launch an investigation into these practices".

Some tattoo artists and



Thinking Ink: Jack McMahon and Michael Lett (above), who bought a tattoo kit online, and tattoos completed at home.

Photos: James Alcock



On the web
Go online to see a gallery of home-drawn tattoos.

removalists have called for new laws to restrict public access to tattoo guns.

"A licence to buy tattoo guns would be a good idea – there should be some sort of control," said Shaun Kelsall, senior tattoo artist at Bondi Ink.

And Cathleen Hoskins, a tattoo removalist at Tattoo Removal Wollongong, said tattoo guns should be taken off the market for amateurs.

"I definitely do not think backyard equipment should be available," she

said. "There should be a licence to sell and a licence to purchase tattoo equipment that would be regulated through a body like local councils."

Tattoo removal machines are also available online – there are more than 400 listings on eBay.

Breaking the silence over gay killings

In 1989 John Russell was a victim in a gay-hate murder 'epidemic'. His family now wants a reward offered to find his killers. **Rick Feneley** reports.

Ted Russell leads the way through a patch of forest on his old farm. He and his son Peter sit down by a cluster of bush rocks and port bottles, the overgrown, makeshift grave that covers the ashes of John Russell. This slice of paradise near Wollombi, in the Hunter Valley, is where John – Peter's only brother – was going to build a cabin so he could live and work on the farm with their father.

On the morning of November 24, 1989, Ted drove to Sydney, planning to help his son make the big move to the country.

"I left the farm here to travel to Peter's place in Bondi to pick John up," Ted recalls. "Peter answered the door and I said, 'Where's John?'"

Peter picks weeds from around the grave as he takes up the story: "I said, 'You'd better come in and sit down because I've got some terrible news.'" Ted pitches in: "That John was dead."

Peter Russell had just been to Glebe Coroner's Court to confirm

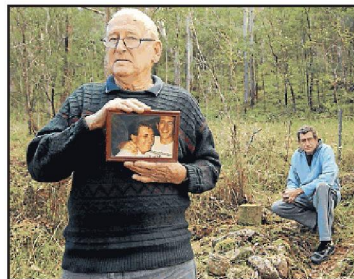
that John, 31, was the same man who had been found dead at the base of a cliff at Marks Park in Bondi that morning. Now Peter told his father that it seemed John had been murdered.

"Having grown up in Bondi, I knew a lot of young people at the time went out gay bashing," Peter says. "And John and his friends had been set upon previously." Not in Bondi, around Darlinghurst.

Marks Park was a well-known gay beat, a place for men to meet for sex. It was also a regular haunt for young gangs of "poofter bashers" and the venue for a spate of gay-hate murders in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As reported by Fairfax Media on Saturday, analysis of police data suggests that up to 80 deaths and disappearances, from the late 1970s to late 1990s, could fit into the gay-hate category. While about 50 cases have been solved, there are almost 30 unsolved. They include cases that police or coroners originally dismissed as suicides or accidents.

In 1989, police were quick to dis-



Makeshift grave: John Russell's father Ted and his brother Peter, in Wollombi. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

miss John Russell's case as an accidental fall: "no suspicious circumstance". There were many.

"He had all the skin missing off his hands," Peter says. "He had a piece of hair jammed between his fingers."

That clump of blond hair could be vital evidence. It might one day prove who threw John over the cliff.

Peter says it demonstrates one thing beyond doubt: "He put up a fight. John could look after himself. As a young guy he did boxing, he did judo, so it wouldn't have been a walk-up start for anyone to go over there and throw him. It needed to be two or three people to do that."

But police lost that exhibit. In 2005, the then deputy state coroner, Jacqueline Milledge, would call this bungle a "disgrace" and the whole investigation "lacklustre". She found John Russell had indeed been thrown off the cliff. Likewise, she found the 25-year-old newsreader Ross Warren was murdered at the same park. Police had also written off his disappearance as an accidental fall. Milledge also found Gilles Mattaini, a Frenchman who vanished around Marks Park in 1985, was probably murdered.

Last year, deputy state coroner Carmel Forbes threw out the suicide



Web iPad

The Russell family's fight for justice.

finding for 27-year-old Scott Johnson – 23 years after the naked body of the American PhD student was found at the base of North Head, near Blue Fish Point.

Forbes found he may have fallen, or it may have been a gay-hate crime, as his family's own investigation had indicated. In February, police launched a \$100,000 reward for information on the Johnson case.

Ted and Peter Russell wonder why no reward has been offered for John, or Warren or Mattaini.

Some members of the Bondi Boys and other gangs were discussed as possible persons of interest, but there was never enough evidence to charge anyone.

"Maybe their old mates need a bit of encouragement," Peter says.

Ted reasons: "I suppose someone who was involved, their conscience might get the better of them, or somebody's bragged to someone else, and that person comes forward to say, 'Someone told me years ago that they threw John over a cliff!'"

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