The rising demand for tattoo removal

By Beatrice Aidin

In an increasingly crowded jobs market, it is not just in Tokyo that ink on skin is becoming taboo.

Could it be a coincidence that just as Caroline Kennedy becomes more visibly political – in October she was confirmed by the US Senate as ambassador to Japan – the butterfly tattoo below her elbow appears to be fading and is increasingly hidden beneath long-sleeved Chanel jackets?

Kennedy, the daughter of assassinated president John F. Kennedy, will no doubt make an exemplary ambassador but she is well advised to cover up her tattoo – or even have laser treatment to remove it – if her ambitions in politics continue in earnest.

Indeed President Obama’s promotion of Kennedy is at odds with the 61 per cent of HR managers who believe a visible tattoo damages a job applicant’s chances of employment. “The influence of appearance goes beyond the hiring process. It has an impact on the perception of one’s competence,” say the authors of an annual *study on professionalism in the workplace* from the Centre for Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania.

The US Army’s proposed ban on visible tattoos (those below the knee or elbow or above the neckline) also implies that they are becoming less acceptable at work.

“No one is going to take you seriously if you’re up for partnership and you have a tattoo of a dolphin on your hand,” says Bryan Mayou, a plastic surgeon at the Cadogan Clinic in London. In the past two years, Mayou says, he has seen a 50 per cent increase in patients for tattoo removal at his Chelsea practice.

“Sailors were the original tattoo addicts but now they go across the socioeconomic spectrum. It’s an epidemic, and we now see bankers and lawyers in their late thirties and forties of both sexes coming in because they are genuinely embarrassed by them,” says Dr Nick Lowe, consultant dermatologist and spokesman for the British Academy of Dermatology.
“People associate tattoos with drunken behaviour,” explains Dr Amy Forman Taub, a dermatologist in Illinois where interest in removal is up 30 per cent. “In a creative environment like advertising or in Silicon Valley, a tattoo is OK or even expected. But on Wall Street a tattoo would not be advantageous to your career.”

Dr Ben Saunders, a tattoo removal specialist at UK chain Trueskin MediSpa, has a different take: “I see tattoos more as an outlet for compulsive behaviour,” he says. “Celebrities such as Cara Delevingne and David Beckham are constantly adding tattoos; it has become a habit to mark every momentous occasion with ink.”

Last year the British Academy of Dermatology reported a third of people regretted their tattoo, which has led to new laser technology to remove them.

“Lasers put out an ultra-fast pulsed width of light that you can actually hear hitting the skin,” says Frank D’Amelio, chief executive of Ellman International, a company that makes lasers for tattoo removal. “The shock breaks up the ink into small particles and these fine particles are removed through the lymph system.” Anything from three to 15 sessions are required, costing from £150 a treatment, depending on the size and colour of the ink.

“The toughest pigments to remove are yellow, blue and green,” says Dr Roy Geronemus, director of the Laser and Skin Surgery Centre in New York. “But I am seeing a lot more successes with PicoSure treatment.”

The PicoSure laser, launched in April, may be paving the way for quicker tattoo removal but such advances in technology are also having an adverse effect.

“Generation Y have a much more transient view of tattoos because they think they can easily get them removed,” says Catherine Cottney, senior trend analyst at Mintel. “They don’t realise how expensive and painful it is.”

Painful? “Basically we are burning the skin so I inject liquid anaesthetic into each area,” says Forman Taub.

Now that Kennedy has been made ambassador, she will need to think hard about whether the butterfly stays; in Japan a small tattoo can even prohibit entry to some restaurants and shops. And in an increasingly crowded jobs market, it is not just in Tokyo that tattoos are becoming taboo.

[ft.com/stylestockists]
Cadogan Clinic, from £150

British Academy of Dermatology

Dr Amy Forman Taub, Illinois, from $350/£215

Ellman International Recommended laser: The Medley Multifunction Laser, $150/£90 a session

Laser & Skin Surgery Centre of New York, from $400/£250

Trueskin MediSpa, from £199 per session