ON an Etobicoke highway, at the bend of a dry cleaner and an Apache Burger, sits a tiny tattoo parlour: Tat-A-Rama is as shiny as an old time barber shop and as scrubbed as a surgical ward — which is what you hope for if you’re going to get your penis split open.

Subincision — a permanent procedure where the cut is open lengthwise to expose the urethra — is touted as an “enhancement procedure,” offering greater sexual pleasure. “You can cut a little at a time (over a month or two). You stitch the urethra to the outer skin. If you do it too quickly it causes too much scar tissue,” says body artist Tom Branda, adding that subincision is becoming popular because of information about it on the Internet.

Shannon Larratt, publisher and editor of the Internet site BME (Body Modification Extreme), subincised himself using the “clamp and cut” method Branda describes. He says the operation enhanced the size he expected. But he can’t describe the difference.

Males into sounding and urethral play will understand the under the umbrella of “garden hose”. The increased sensitivity decreases somewhat over time as the tissue thicken, just like the skin thicken after circumcision. (Sounding is inserting rods and other utensils into the urethra to stimulate the sensitive nerves there.)

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Infection control liaison with the Toronto City Public Health Department, can’t see bisection leaving a functional penis. “How would it work? You’d have to carefully cut the urethra perfectly in half. It’d split all over like a garden hose. One of the things that prevents males from urinary tract infection is the urethra,” she says.

With procedures like subincision, piercing and tattooing practitioners are walking a fine line between body art and surgery. And as they develop more sophisticated skills and techniques, they’re pushing for more education and information about these practices and for government regulations.

In September, as Ontario Ministry Of Health committee will release new guidelines to regulate infection control for personal services, like tattooing and piercing parlours. Initiated because of 30 patients became infected with hepatitis B last year through EEG needles (used to probe the scalp to measure brain activity via an electrical current), the guidelines also deal with sterilizing equipment and correct tattooing and piercing procedures.

“Renewed interest in the clinic had a profound impact on progress,” says Pat Cloutier, a medical officer with the ministry. But some body artists say that the guidelines have been made to protect the public.

infection isn’t the real issue and that these new regulations haven’t changed the procedures currently being performed. “They need to ask us what they should be doing,” says Blair who has done the procedure for 10 years now. “But I learned that a procedure that’s safe,” he says. A copy of the Manual on Subincision Practice sits on Blair’s bookshelf, along with a tattoo of Mr. T.

We’re collaborating on projects,” says City of Toronto nurse Joanne Braithwaite, who added that she ran the guidelines under the auspices of the Board of Health and the Board of Physical and Surgery of Ontario, “won’t say whether practices like subincision are illegal.” It’s buyer beware. You’d probably have to go through the civil service if you wanted some compensation for a procedure that went wrong, because practitioners aren’t doctors and the college only regulates medical professionals,” she says.

“It’s a gray area. You’re not going to get anything,” adds Tom Branda, who’s had several clients go to court under Section 24.

While safety and legality are questionable, subincision is a traditional procedure. ‘Like piercing (inserting ball beneath the skin on the penis shaft), subincision’s been used for a long time. The mutatation of the penis among Aboriginal Australians, who simulate a vagina, is well known and illustrates the designation of male identity when boys cross over a social divide into adulthood,” reads a paper delivered at a 1997 body modification conference. The paper, “Body Mark: Neo-tribalism In Cool Societies,” discusses the body modification with spiritual cleansing and purifying rituals in many societies.

Other types of extreme body modification don’t have such historical precedent. In another BME interview, artist’s Steve Hayter, a self-described 3-D artist who calls his work “medium,” details how he inserted “metal horns” in two men’s foreskins.

With Brenda’s assistance, Hayter also inserted a fist-sized, flat, square metal plate on a man’s forehand. “The twenty-centimetre cross to his heart. Haytow also separated tissue between the fascia (fibrous tissue on top of the fascia) and dermis, inserting the metal into the subcutaneous (fat under the skin). Haytorow also inserts jewellery beneath skin on the hand of the back, on the forehead and in the forearm.

In Toronto, Brenda says, “a lot more people are asking for why I’m doing this. They go elsewhere to get it done; they’re probably doing it without anything to use, without guidance or instruction.” But I learned that a procedure that’s safe,” he says. A copy of the Manual on Subincision Practice sits on Blair’s bookshelf, along with a tattoo of Mr. T.

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