

*Samoan Tatau. A holistic process
of cultural tattooing.*

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19th-century Samoan tattoo artist inks a traditional design on a man's back.

"E sui faiga, ae tumau le fa'avae"

The form changes, but the underlying
principles remain.

Samoan Proverb





Tufuga: Su'a Alaiva'a Suluape and toso. Malofie Auckland Exhibition. 12 October 2016



My children. My family.





Pe'a (left) Samoan male tattoo. Malu (right) Samoan female tattoo.



Aim

To explore the current health and hygiene standards of Tufuga tā tatau in Aotearoa, New Zealand and determine from toso and recipients of pe'a and malu, their understanding of the health and safety standards placed on them by Tufuga.



Samoa traditional tattoo instrument – le au.





Pe'a – A Samoan traditional male tattoo.



Malu – A Samoan traditional female tattoo.



Health risks

- » Tattooing is a very high-risk practice that is linked to bloodborne diseases and serious illnesses such as Hepatitis B, HIV, Necrotising Fasciitis, Kidney injuries, bacterial infections, allergic reactions and long term ink toxicity.
- » 1 in 5 New Zealanders and 1 in 3 New Zealanders under the age of 30 years have a tattoo.
- » Key problems include unlicensed tattoo operators.
- » Large ethnic disparities in chronic HBV infection and its consequences exist in New Zealand; chronic HBV infection affects approximately 7 per cent of people of Pacific ethnicity.
- » Traditional tattooing continues to pose a very high risk of injury and infection to customers specifically with traditional tools (Auckland Council, 2024).
- » Compressed procedure (5 days – 2/3 weeks) decreases time for healing and increases the risk of infection and illness.
- » Increasingly more people <50 years getting a tatau.



Infections as a result of traditional tatau in NZ from 2003

- » 2003 – Two cases of necrotizing fasciitis and cellulitis, one resulting in death following traditional tattooing in Auckland, New Zealand.
- » Over the last 20 years complications of severe infections such as severe cellulitis, necrotising fasciitis, septic shock, acute kidney injury, surgical debridement and skin grafts have been reported mainly in Auckland and Wellington, among people who received tatau particularly males who received the pe'a.



Serious tatau infection in March 2020

Blood brothers: tattoo sepsis in two Samoan men

Prashant Lakshman, Christine Zhang, Michelle Balm, Yesim Morice, Cindy Towns

Traditional Samoan tattooing (tatau) is a cultural process that dates to 1500 BC.¹ Customary tools consist of a boar tusk comb with sharp teeth and wooden mallet.^{1,2} To reduce the risk of infection, the equipment should be sterilised prior to application, between applications and between different sites.

We present the cases of two Samoan brothers admitted to Wellington Hospital in March 2020 with infective complications following traditional Samoan tattooing performed by a visiting Tufuga.

Case reports

Patient 1

A 45-year-old Samoan man presented to Wellington Hospital Emergency Department with a rash, wheeze and light-headedness approximately 12 hours after completing five days of traditional tattooing using titanium steel needles. At completion, coconut oil and turmeric were rubbed over the tattoos. By the following morning, he developed tongue swelling, wheeze and a pruritic, urticarial rash over his arms. He was otherwise well with no comorbidities.

He was initially treated for an allergic reaction. However, he subsequently became febrile (39.1°C), hypotensive (104/61 mmHg) and tachycardic (HR 120 bpm). His legs were noted to be swollen, erythematous and tender with yellow serous fluid oozing from tattoo sites on the left thigh. He responded well to fluid resuscitation and was started on IV flucloxacillin for widespread cellulitis. The specific aetiology for the allergic reaction in case one could not be identified as more than one agent had been used prior to the symptoms developing.

Laboratory tests showed an acute kidney injury (AKI) with a creatinine of 117 µmol/L.

C-reactive protein (CRP) was 78 mg/L with a normal white cell count. Creatinine kinase was 1,126 U/L but without evidence of deep tissue infection. Two sets of blood cultures taken at admission grew flucloxacillin-susceptible *Staphylococcus aureus*.

The patient voiced distress, reporting that damage to the tattoo would be a 'bad omen' for the family. A cream containing dexpanthenol and benzalkonium chloride was applied and 60 mg of oral prednisone daily was started to decrease inflammation. The patient was discharged on day four to complete a 14-day course of 1 g oral flucloxacillin QID and 500 mg probenecid QID. The prednisone was weaned over seven days.



Patient 2

A 43-year-old Samoan male, the brother to Case 1, presented to Wellington Hospital ED with two days of subjective fevers and leg swelling following ta tatau. He was febrile on admission (38.6°C), had bilateral lower limb swelling and erythematous areas bilaterally over his arms. He had extensive tattooing over the back and lower legs as per his brother (above) with widespread erythema and tenderness over these regions. He was medically stable on arrival but was started on IV flucloxacillin and oral clindamycin for extensive cellulitis. Blood



Causes of serious infections

- » International literature – the practice of traditional tatau can result in severe sepsis and health complications including death.
- » Public health investigations – poor infection control knowledge and inadequate equipment and products to clean and sterilise tools and instruments.
- » Awareness and education – patients accessing health care services or the hospitals very late, due to the lack of cultural guidance or knowledge about the expectations from Tufuga on how to manage health complications.
- » Fear - the fear of exposing the Tufuga which may have negative consequences on the Tufuga, client and client's family.
- » Non-compliance to cultural protocols and rules – client and family members not following the agreed cultural protocols and rules from the Tufuga.
- » National & regional guidelines and Council Bylaw – Inconsistent policies and monitoring of compliance.



Methodology & Method

Talanoa is an indigenous qualitative research approach used for the data collection through semi-structured face to face interviews (Vaioleti, 2006).

Le vā is an invisible language that enables space and things to be configured in a positive manner” (Refiti, 2002).

'teu le vā' - to cherish/nurse/care for *le vā* and **'tausi le vā'** - to maintain/look after/care for the *vā* relationship (Anae, 2010).

The Fonofale model - used in the research process as a reference to guide the types of interview questions to ask participants, from a holistic perspective (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).



Participants

- » Three master tufuga tā tatau based in Auckland.
- » Three toso – Auckland based.
- » Three pe'a – Two from Auckland and one from Samoa.
- » Three malu – All living in Auckland.



Tufuga tā tatau – Traditional Samoan Tattooist

- » **Training. Apprenticeship vs self taught.**
- » Adapting to the Auckland Council Health and Hygiene Bylaw 2013.
- » Personal health and holistic wellbeing.
- » **Duty of care.** Responsibilities of safe practice and care of toso, clients and their families.
- » Samoan culture and customs in the practice of tāga tatau – cultural safety and understanding the cultural significance of tatau.
- » The value of aiga – the role of the family.
- » Sā and tapu – tatau protocols, rules and rituals of tatau.



Toso - Stretcher



- » Le vā tapu'ia – sacred relationship between tufuga and toso.
- » Training for stretchers as the tausi pe'a – carer of the male client and their tatau.
- » The value of the toso.

“we do a lot of different tasks.. we fofō.. we show the tausi pe'a how to fofō.. we clean the tools.. spraying everything .. operate the ultrasonic machine..” (Toso, 2020).



Pe'a – male participants

- » Expectation vs reality.
- » Le vā between tufuga and pe'a.
- » The value of aiga.
- » Responsibility to care about the fa'asamoa and aganu'u.
- » Sā and tapu.



Malu – female participants

- » Le vā: Tufuga and malu. Communication, information and education.
- » The significant role of the toso.
- » The value of aiga.
- » Personal health and hygiene.
- » Responsibility to care about the fa'asamoa and aganu'u.
- » Sā and tapu.





Some key findings

- » For many people who were born and live outside of Samoa, traditional Samoan tatau remains a significant symbol of cultural identity, responsibility and service to family, village, community and to Samoa.
- » The Auckland council Bylaws are a narrow approach and does not include cultural protocols or process that are an important part of maintaining hygiene standards.
- » Many Tufuga are aware of the Auckland Council Bylaw and Code of Practice but their understanding of it and implementation of it varies.
- » Training and education on infection, prevention and control, bloodborne diseases and communicable diseases must be included the Code of Practice.
- » Le vā (relationship) between the Tufuga, the client and family is a key part of maintaining a positive experience for everyone throughout the tatau procedure and lessens the risk of infection or health complications.



Le vā

The concept of le vā is essential to maintaining the relationships throughout the tatau process and the safety and success of a fully healed tatau.

The 'vā' is an invisible language that enables space and things to be configured in a positive manner" (Refiti, 2002).

Le vā fe'alo'aloa'i (Respectful space),

Le vā feso'ota'i (Connecting space),

Le vā fetūfa'a'i (sharing space),

Le vā fa'afeso'ai (Consultation space),

***Le vā tapu'ia* (Sacred space/covenant)**



Health and Safety standards of tāga tatau is a **holistic process**

Tāga tatau knowledge and skills, the Samoan cultural values, beliefs, protocols and practices which underpin the health and hygiene standards.

- ❖ Sa'iliga o se tufuga – Research your Tufuga
- ❖ Feso'otaiga – Meet with the Tufuga
- ❖ **Sauni ma tapenapena – Preparation**
- ❖ **Tāga tatau – Procedure**
- ❖ Sāmaga – Closing ceremony
- ❖ **Fa'aauau pea le tausiga o le tatau – Aftercare**



Recent outcomes from recommendations



- » Auckland Council Regulatory and Community Safety Committee Meeting 2024 – recommended changes to the Health & Hygiene & Code for traditional tattooing.
- » Tufuga ta tatau consultation fono 2026 - the Health and Hygiene and Control Review.
 - Section – Tattooing with tools made from natural materials.
 - Subsection clarifies – rules do not regulate the cultural or spiritual aspect of customary tattooing.
 - Focuses on ensuring tools are used hygienically and do not transmit disease or infection.
 - Providers to be suitably qualified with officially recognised qualifications.





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Tufuga ta tatau, New Zealand



Malofie A Samoa Association



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