

# **Customary Tattooing Guidelines for Operators**

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MANATŪ HAUORA

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# Customary Tattooing Guidelines for Operators

Customary tattooing or tatau has been an important part of Samoan culture for over 2000 years. As with all skin piercing practices, there are potential health risks associated with applying a tatau by hand. These guidelines have been prepared to reduce those risks.

The guidelines have been developed by the Ministry of Health in consultation with customary tattooists/tufuga, the Lagi Malofie Society, Samoan community leaders and infectious disease experts.

## What is the purpose of these guidelines?

These guidelines are to help protect people from illness or injury due to infection or contamination resulting from customary tattooing.

## Who are they for?

These guidelines are for the use of customary tattooists/tufuga. Cultural groups are encouraged to use these guidelines in the traditional or cultural context and to encourage the appropriate hygienic procedures essential to safe tattooing.

## How do infections occur?

Any breaking of the skin's surface means there is a risk of infection. Common bacteria and viruses can get in and may cause scarring or sickness.

Infections and cross-contamination can be minimised if:

- equipment is properly cleaned each time a different person is to be tattooed
- used and clean tools do not come in contact with one another
- clean tools are placed on clean surfaces
- dirty linen, dressings, spatulas and disposable gloves are thrown away immediately and appropriately
- materials that people being tattooed come in contact with are clean and are handled and used hygienically
- the tattooist/tufuga observes personal hygiene standards (for example, hand washing)
- the premises, including furniture, are kept hygienically clean and in good repair
- disinfection/sterilisation practices and equipment are adequate.

Needles and other sharp instruments that are used to penetrate the skin become contaminated by contact with blood. Blood may be infected with a variety of blood-borne viruses and/or bacteria. Viruses and common bacteria can be transmitted when contaminated instruments penetrate the skin.

Even small amounts of infected blood can pass on infection. Bacteria and viruses that spread through blood include:

- bacteria that cause skin infections
- hepatitis B and C, which are viruses that can cause inflammation of the liver, long-term illness, liver damage and eventually cancer
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) – the virus that causes AIDS.

Because of the nature of the tools traditionally used in customary tattoo procedures it is impossible to completely eliminate the risk of blood-borne infections. Attention to cleanliness by tattooists/tufuga can significantly reduce the risks.

## **What are the possible infections?**

### **Viral infections**

Viral infections do not necessarily produce symptoms or signs. For this reason, it is important that customary tattooists/tufuga encourage clients to have tests if they are at all worried or if an accident involving blood occurs. Tattooists/tufuga themselves are encouraged to regularly undergo the necessary tests for viral illnesses, whether or not they display symptoms. In the case of HIV, a tattooist/tufuga should discuss precautions with their medical practitioner when appropriate.

### **Hepatitis C**

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus. It can cause long-term illness and can result in liver damage and also lead to cancer of the liver. There is no known cure for hepatitis C; nor is there a preventive vaccine. The majority of people infected with hepatitis C in New Zealand have contracted the virus by using injecting equipment, or from contaminated blood transfusions conducted before blood screening was available.

### **Hepatitis B**

Symptoms of acute hepatitis B include tiredness, malaise, jaundice and an inflamed and often painful liver. The infection can also result in long-term illness, including liver damage and liver cancer. Hepatitis B can be transmitted by blood on instruments used for tattooing procedures and through poor hygiene.

A safe effective vaccine is available for hepatitis B: a course of three injections will provide full protection to most children and young adults (to whom the vaccine is most commonly given). A blood test will show whether a person is protected. In the interests of their own personal health and client safety, tattooists/tufuga should ensure they are vaccinated. Local doctors can arrange this.

### **HIV**

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. Skin piercing poses the risk of contracting HIV. At present there is no vaccine against HIV/AIDS and no cure. Safe and hygienic practices minimise the chance of transmission during tattooing.



## **Bacterial infections**

Unhygienic practices can introduce common bacteria (bugs) such as staphylococcus into the body, which may lead to skin infection, wound breakdown or infection of the blood.

## **What are the principles for healthy and hygienic tattooing?**

Tattooists/tufuga should provide their clients with professionally experienced, safe and hygienic services, in clean premises. It is essential for customary tattooists/tufuga to be fully aware of the potential dangers of their procedures and understand the safety measures that need to be taken to make the likelihood of infection, or spread of bugs, as small as possible.

The following basic principles must be observed by tattooists/tufuga:

- The premises must be kept clean and hygienic.
- Any article used for penetrating the skin must be sterile.
- Any article that has penetrated the skin or is contaminated with blood must be either disposed of immediately, as infectious or biological waste, or be cleaned and sterilised before being used on another person.
- Tattooists/tufuga must keep themselves and their clothing clean: any cuts, abrasions or wounds they have should be covered and they must not smoke during the tattooing process.
- Animals should not be permitted on the premises where skin penetration activities are carried out (except guide dogs for the visually impaired).
- Employers in the customary tattooing industry should provide adequate training for staff in all areas of hygiene, infection control and first aid.
- All tattooists/tufuga should be vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- It is the tattooist/tufuga's responsibility to ensure that the whole service is provided to a sufficient standard of hygiene to ensure client and operator safety.

## **Before tattooing**

The tattooist/tufuga must:

- 1) prepare the person to be tattooed by:
  - i) providing information to allow them to give informed consent
  - ii) advise people with diabetes or another medical condition to discuss getting a tatau with their family doctor
- 2) prepare the work area by:
  - i) ensuring that it is clean and tidy
  - ii) ensuring all the items to be used are within easy reach, including:
    - new or clean wipes for wiping away ink/blood

- a container for disposing of contaminated wipes or holding wipes prior to cleaning
  - fresh gloves for the tattooist/tufuga and all persons assisting
- 3) prepare the ink (whether pre-purchased or the traditional substance: soot obtained by burning the nuts of the lama/candlenut tree) by:
- i) using fresh ink for each tattooing session, whether freshly made or decanted from another bottle
  - ii) using disposable ink containers
  - iii) disposing of unused ink at the end of each session, and not reusing ink
- 4) prepare themselves by:
- i) removing all jewellery
  - ii) washing their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 30 seconds, including wrists and forearms up to the elbow
  - iii) drying their hands thoroughly with a disposable towel or freshly laundered towel
  - iv) putting on glasses for eye protection
  - v) putting on gloves
- 5) prepare skin by:
- i) making sure the person to be tattooed is seated comfortably and positioned so they will not harm themselves if they faint
  - ii) checking the person's skin is clean and free from infection
  - iii) if the area needs to be shaved, using a new disposable safety razor for each person, and disposing of the razor immediately following its use in an appropriate sharps container
  - iv) disinfecting the skin around the site to be tattooed: areas around the eyes should be cleaned with povidone-iodine, and skin on other areas can be disinfected using any of the following preparations:
    - 70 percent w/w ethyl alcohol
    - 80 percent v/v ethyl alcohol
    - 60 percent v/v isopropyl alcohol
    - alcoholic (isopropyl and ethyl) formulations of 0.5 to 4 percent w/v chlorhexidine
    - aqueous detergent or alcoholic formulation of povidone-iodine (1 percent w/v available iodine).

Use-by dates on disinfectants must be observed. In some people, povidone-iodine may cause a skin reaction if left on the skin.

The disinfectants mentioned in this last point can be applied to the skin using a spray-bottle or pump pack and wiping with a clean disposable cloth. Alternatively, skin disinfectants may be decanted from their original container into a single-use container. At the end of the tattooing procedure, any remaining fluid and disposable cloths must be discarded into a biological and infectious waste container. Alcohol in the form of sterile disposable swabs may also be used to disinfect the skin.

It is important to wait at least two minutes between skin preparation and skin penetration, so that the disinfectant has sufficient time to kill organisms.

### **During and after tattooing**

During tattooing, the tattooist/tufuga must:

- 1) keep the work area tidy
- 2) only work on one client at a time, or use separate tools on each client
- 3) ensure all ink containers are one-use only, and carefully dispose of them
- 4) clean their hands at appropriate intervals, and at least prior to commencing any new procedure
- 5) wash their hands:
  - before and after each session and/or person to be tattooed
  - immediately after removing soiled gloves
  - immediately after going to the toilet
  - immediately after eating or smoking
  - immediately before putting on clean gloves.

The tattooist/tufuga must manage waste by:

- 1) placing all contaminated material, including blood-contaminated wipes, soiled gloves, ink and ink pots, in an approved biological waste container
- 2) disposing of all waste at an approved biological waste management facility
- 3) cleaning all reusable sheets, towels, and so on.

After tattooing the tattooist/tufuga must:

- 1) provide the person they have tattooed with instructions detailing appropriate after-care provisions, such as those contained within the Guidelines for the Safe Piercing of Skin (Ministry of Health 1998), available on the Ministry of Health website: [www.moh.govt.nz](http://www.moh.govt.nz)
- 2) provide the person they have tattooed with the Traditional Tattooing pamphlet (Auckland Regional Health Centre 2007) (see Appendix 1)
- 3) inform the person they have tattooed when they should return for their next session (see Appendix 1)
- 4) inform the person what to do if pain persists
- 5) advise the person to rest, and take adequate food and fluids

- 6) advise the person how to check for signs of infection: redness, swelling, pus, fever (feeling very hot or cold), diarrhoea or boils
- 7) advise the person who to contact if unwell.

## **Cleaning of tattooing instruments**

### **Cleaning**

- Use single-use, disposable, pre-sterilised equipment wherever possible.
- Wear thick heavy-duty rubber gloves when washing contaminated instruments. Take care at all times to prevent any contact of mucous membranes (such as eyes) with blood or body fluid from contaminated equipment.
- Carefully rinse equipment in warm running water. Hot water at this stage of cleaning can cook biological material and make it stick to the instrument. Cold water will harden fats, making cleaning more difficult.
- Fully dismantle the instruments.
- Immerse instruments in hot water and detergent in a sink. While holding the instruments under the surface of the water, scrub the instruments with a heat-disinfected cleaning brush. This step may be carried out using an ultrasonic cleaner, in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Rinse cleaned instruments in hot running water.
- New reusable needles and instruments need to be cleaned and sterilised before use, if not purchased pre-sterilised.

Reusable instruments must be cleaned as soon as possible after use. It is crucial to complete this step before sterilisation. Cleaning should take place in a cleaning area set aside for the purpose.

### **Sterilising**

- Soak tools and scrub implements in PeraSafe solution (or equivalent) mixed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, and soak for at least 20 minutes.
- Clean with sterile water.
- Allow tools to air dry for at least 45 minutes before reuse, protecting them from contaminants while they are drying.
- Store tools in a sterile bag if possible.

It is much easier to scrub tools clean with a tooth brush straight after the tattoo is finished, before the ink and blood has had a chance to completely dry on the tools.

Ideally, tools should be cleaned in a separate sink that is only used for cleaning tools. Otherwise, a stainless steel or glass bowl that is not used for anything else can be used. The tooth brush and the part of the tool being scrubbed should be kept immersed in water during the cleaning process, to prevent ink and blood from being spread around.

PeraSafe is a product developed to sterilise items made of plastic and rubber and other materials that cannot be cleaned in the only totally effective sterilisation method, an autoclave (a cleaning machine that sterilises equipment by heating substances above their boiling point), and is therefore the best option for sterilising the porous materials used in traditional tattooing tools, such as bone. It is important that the PeraSafe solution is mixed correctly. If not enough powder is used, it may not be totally effective, and if too much powder is used, the solution may damage the tools.

## Relevant legislation

Tattooists/tufuga should be aware of relevant legislation, as well as the *Customary Tattooing Guidelines for Operators*.

### The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992

The object of this Act is to promote the prevention of harm to all people at work, and others in, or in the vicinity of, places of work. It applies to all New Zealand workplaces, and specifies the responsibilities of employers, the self-employed, employees, principals and others who manage or control hazards. It requires the maintenance of safe working environments, and the implementation of sound practice.

### The Crimes Act 1961

This Act requires that surgical procedures be performed with a reasonable standard of care.

### Auckland City Council bylaws

See:<http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/Council/documents/bylaw/part17.asp#9>

### Manukau City Consolidated Bylaw 2008, Chapter 18: Tattooing, Beauty Therapy, Skin Penetration and Piercing

The bylaw specifies standards that practitioners and their premises must adhere to.

See:[http://www.manukau.govt.nz/uploadedFiles/manukaugovtnz/Your\\_Council/By\\_Laws/Chapter%2018%20Tattooing,%20Beauty%20Therapy,%20Skin%20Penetration%20and%20Piercing%20\(amended%2025%20Sep%202008\).pdf](http://www.manukau.govt.nz/uploadedFiles/manukaugovtnz/Your_Council/By_Laws/Chapter%2018%20Tattooing,%20Beauty%20Therapy,%20Skin%20Penetration%20and%20Piercing%20(amended%2025%20Sep%202008).pdf)

## Consent

Any procedure that invades someone's body in any way that is performed without permission may be regarded as assault. It is therefore important that a person receiving such a procedure gives their consent.

The essential elements of consent in health care are that it is:

- voluntarily given by the client
- based on full provision of information on risks to the client
- given by a client who has the capacity to consent.

Information must be given in a manner which fully explains the nature of the procedure, the outcomes of it and any risks involved. The information must be understandable, and therefore take into account the age of the person involved and their understanding of the language used. Providing written as well as verbal explanation is a wise precaution, as is obtaining consent in writing.

While a child or young person under 20 may legally consent to a procedure, care must be taken to ensure that the child or young person is competent to do so in terms of their capacity to understand what is involved and the full implications of the outcome of the procedure. If the child or young person is judged not to be competent to give consent, their parents' consent is essential. Before a practitioner seeks the consent of parents, the child or young person must give permission for the parents to be given information, in order to protect the child or young person's privacy rights. Where the child or young person is under 16, it is wise to encourage them to involve their parents or guardians in the decision to be tattooed.

## References

Auckland Regional Public Health Service. 2007. *Traditional Tattooing*. Auckland: Auckland Regional Public Health Service.

Ministry of Health. 1998. *Guidelines for the Safe Piercing of Skin*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

National customary tattooing fono held in Auckland, 19 December 2008.

# Appendix 1

It is recommended the following information be provided to clients before tattooing procedures. This information comes from the *Traditional Tattooing* pamphlet (also available in Samoan) produced by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service.

## Information for clients getting a customary tattoo

### What is a tatau?

Tatau is the 2000-year-old Samoan tradition of applying tattoo by hand. Many Pacific Islands have a tradition of tattooing.

### Who does the tatau?

The Samoan tatau artist is called a tufuga. The skill is passed from father to son, each tatau artist learning as an apprentice over many years. Tufuga in training often spend hours practising tapping and design using a comb, or au.

### How is a tatau done?

The comb or au is made from sharpened boars' teeth fastened together, with a portion of turtle shell, to a wooden handle. The tufuga uses a mallet to tap the teeth of the ink-laden comb into the skin to create the tatau pattern, using only simple guide marks.

### Risk of infection

#### How do infections occur?

Traditional tattooing does present risks. Any breaking of the skin's surface means there is a risk of infection. Common bacteria can get in and may cause scarring or sickness.

Even invisible amounts of infected blood can pass on infection. Bugs spread in blood include:

- bacteria that cause skin infections
- hepatitis B and C, which can cause inflammation of the liver, long-term illness, liver damage and cancer
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) – the virus that causes AIDS.

Because of the nature of the tools traditionally used in customary tattoo procedures it is impossible to completely eliminate the risk of blood-borne infections. Attention to hygiene by tattooists/tufuga can reduce the risks.

### When getting a tattoo

- It's your body, so it's your choice. Get information to help you make a wise choice. It is important to check that your tattooist/tufuga will keep you safe, as well as do a good job of your tatau.



- Talk to your family doctor first, especially if you are getting an extensive tatau. Discuss any health conditions (for example, diabetes) that could affect your ability to recover from the tatau, and any other health worries you may have about the tatau.

### **How to prepare**

- Don't be afraid to ask your tattooist/tufuga questions.
- It is important that your skin is clean and intact before your tattoo is started – always shower, use antibacterial soap and thoroughly clean your body before tattooing is carried out.

Your tattooist/tufuga and assistants should:

- help you understand fully the process of the tatau, the risks involved and what to do if things go wrong
- use disposable gloves and eye protection
- use newly prepared ink for each person being tattooed
- work in a clean room where smoking is not allowed
- sterilise equipment and keep it in a clean storage area
- dispose of used ink and blood-stained towels separately (and securely) from domestic rubbish
- give you clear 'after care' instructions to minimise pain and risk of wound infection
- agree with you on a sensible time interval between tatau sessions that enables your body to recover: remember to allow for any redness or swelling to go away before your next session.

### **After care**

- Wash your hands before and after touching the tattooed areas, especially if there is any fluid or blood present. Wash gently with water.
- Pat dry with a clean cloth. Ensure cloths are either disposed of or washed in hot water after each use.
- Keep your tatau out of direct sunlight while it is still new.
- Wear loose clothing. Do not share bedding, clothing and towels.
- Avoid scratching – keep nails short to avoid damage.
- Take pain relief medication as needed: if unsure, seek your family doctor's advice.

Signs of infection to watch out for include: increasing redness, soreness, swelling, the presence of pus, fever (feeling very hot or cold), diarrhoea and boils.

If you have any worries about your health, you should contact your local family doctor immediately and inform your tattooist/tufuga.