

Eaten alive by infected tattoo

Investigation as horror bug nearly kills Samoan man

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DOCTORS watched in horror as a flesh-eating disease ravaged the body of a man who was hours from death after being infected during Samoan tattoo sessions.

The victim — one of three young Samoan men hospitalised after the traditional tattooing went horribly wrong — narrowly cheated death.

Now he faces weeks of skin grafts.

He was one of two men who contracted the flesh-eating bacterial disease necrotising fasciitis, sparking an investigation into the actions of a Samoan tattooist.

A third man contracted cellulitis, an acute skin inflammation linked to an infected wound.

It is understood the tattooist, who is cooperating with health officials, did some of the work with traditional boar's tusk tattoo combs.

The Health Ministry confirmed the outbreak yesterday after a *Dominion Post* investigation this week. Health authorities and Labour Department officials have started an inquiry.

"We have identified who did this and asked him to cease his practice until we can address infectious control issues with him," said Wellington medical officer of health Margot McLean. "He is complying."

One of the men who contracted the flesh-eating disease required surgery and skin grafts. He and the cellulitis patient have been discharged.

However, the sickest of the three, who is in his 20s, remains in Hutt Hospital after arriving at its emergency department on Thursday last week. He was hours from death when surgeons began operating.

The surgery took more than five hours and plastic surgeon Charles Davis said the patient's life was in danger throughout.

"The skin that had been tattooed was bubbling and obviously grossly infected. He was going into multiple organ failure. His kidneys stopped working first and his other organs followed."

The treatment was a race against



Dangerous beauty: Traditionally the tattooist is responsible for the hygiene of the equipment, a bone comb dipped into a black candlenut ink and tapped directly into the skin. The process can be agonising, but pain relief is used and the person receiving the tattoo is expected to remain quiet.

the rapid spread of the infection.

"The infection spread very rapidly. We could almost see the borders of it growing hour by hour. All the skin that had been tattooed had melted away and the fat was liquefied underneath — it just rotted away."

Nearly 25 per cent of the patient's total body surface, including skin, fat and infected tissue was removed, said Mr Davis, who performed the surgery with fellow plastic surgeon Tim Hewitt and anaesthetist Poleon Yee.

"He lost five litres of blood in the operation, the whole blood volume of a normal person."

The man was now in a stable condition, Mr Davis said, but faced a long and painful recovery, including skin grafts over several weeks.

The tattoo, which took several days, covered the patient's abdomen, buttocks and back. The most recent tattooing — understood to have involved tusk material — took place two days before he went to hospital.

Mr Davis said a different medical team worked on the second man with necrotising fasciitis and the tattoo link was not identified till both patients' notes were compared.

Auckland man James Leota-Tui, 29, died in July 2002 from necrotising fasciitis and septicemia after receiving a Samoan tattoo.

Samoan Council deputy chairman Tino Pereira condemned unsafe tattooing practices as unacceptable.

A Labour Department spokeswoman said investigators had to determine whether the tattooist was "at work" when the infection was caused. It was too early to say if prosecution could follow — and this was the first time a tattooist had been investigated in such circumstances.