

The Art of Safe Tatau

Honouring tradition while maintaining wellbeing



The purpose of this factsheet is to provide information on safe customary tattooing practices, to prevent contamination and reduce the likelihood of infection.

Le Va supports and honours the tradition of **tatau**, respects and cherishes the knowledge held by our valuable **Tufuga**, and promotes safe and healthy tattooing, so that we can maintain cultural traditions.

This factsheet is published as a result of an inaugural Ta Tatau Health and Safety Workshop attended by **Tufuga ta tatau** from both Samoa and New Zealand, held in Auckland on 25th of June 2019. This information should be read in conjunction with Le Va's video of the fono. Whilst this factsheet focusses more on health and safety practice, cultural and spiritual processes associated with customary tattooing are captured in the video.

Samoan customary tattooing

Many Pacific cultures share a tradition of customary tattooing. Samoan *tatau* is a tradition spanning over 3000 years. The literal meaning of *tatau* is 'to mark'.

Historically, the *tatau* was a rite of passage with deep cultural significance – in Samoa, the *pe'a* and *malu*. *Pe'a* is the traditional design for males that starts from the waist to the knee. Sections of the *pe'a* represent a special meaning to the person's character, family and culture. The *malu* meaning 'shelter' is a more delicate design for females, which spans from the upper thighs to the knees.

The custom of receiving a *tatau* is an intense and painful experience, particularly for the males. It can take weeks or even months to complete a *pe'a* because there are many stages. Once complete, the *pe'a* and *malu* are viewed with cultural pride.

The *tatau* is applied by a master of traditional tattooing called the *Tufuga ta tatau*. This artistry and these skills are traditionally passed from *Tufuga ta tatau* to their son, with each *Tufuga* learning as an apprentice for many years.

The *Tufuga ta tatau's* instruments include a wooden *sausau* (tattooing mallet), and *au* (tattooing comb). The mallet is used to tap the sharp teeth of the ink laden comb, which punctures the skin and inserts the ink. The conception and execution of the design and *tatau* rests solely on the *Tufuga ta tatau*.

The *tatau* symbolises one's land and environment, family, village, ancestors, cosmos, beauty and bravery. It also represents service, courage, identity, honour and duty. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the *tatau* enhances connection to Samoan identity, culture and heritage.

Why do we need to practise hygienic and safe tattooing?

Whenever there is any breaking or puncturing of the skin's surface, bacteria or viruses can enter and cause infection. Bacteria and viruses that spread through blood include:

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

Hygienic and safe practices reduce the chances of infections.

Ministry of Health principles for healthy and hygienic tattooing

It is the tattooist's/*Tufuga's* responsibility to 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 prevent cross-contamination or infection. The Ministry of Health outlines the following basic principles that must be observed by tattooists/*Tufuga* (2010, p3):

- ✘ 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.

For the **Tufuga**/Tattooist

Before tattooing

- ✘ Provide info to the client to allow them to give informed consent & encourage them to talk with their doctor first.
- ✘ Use single-use, disposable pre-sterilised tools and equipment wherever possible.
- ✘ Ensure a clean, sterile and tidy work area and sterile tools. This includes new and clean wipes for wiping the ink/blood, and all equipment within easy reach.
- ✘ Prepare fresh ink for each tattoo session, and disposable ink containers. Dispose unused ink at the end of each session and do no reuse.
- ✘ Prepare themselves by using glasses for eye protection, remove jewellery, wash & dry hands thoroughly and wear fresh gloves.
- ✘ Clean and prep skin: check that skin is clean and free from infection. Use a new and clean razor to shave any skin. Disinfect the area of skin that will be tattooed (make sure disinfectant is not expired). Wait for 2 minutes for disinfectant to penetrate and kill bacteria.

During tattooing

- ✘ Maintain and clean a hygienic work area. This includes working on one client at a time with separate tools on each client (to avoid contaminating).
- ✘ The *Tufuga* and all staff should wash hands regularly.
 - Before and after each session.
 - Immediately after removing soiled gloves.
 - Following toilet use.
 - Following any smoking.
 - Before and after eating.
 - Before putting on clean gloves.
- ✘ Manage waste by
 - Placing all contaminated material (any wipes, used gloves, ink and ink pots) into a biological waste container.
 - Dispose biological waste containers in a biological waste management facility.
 - Clean all reusable material (e.g. sheets and towels).

After tattooing

- ✘ Provide aftercare information to the client such as the Ministry of Health Guidelines for the Safe Piercing of Skin.
- ✘ Let client know when to return for follow up session and pain management.
- ✘ Provide general self-care knowledge for the client such as rest, adequate food and fluids.
- ✘ Provide information on signs for infections such as redness, swelling, pus, fever, diarrhoea or boils. The *Tufuga* should advise clients on services or persons to contact if they are unwell.
- ✘ Clean and sterilise any reusable tools as soon as possible after use before the ink and blood has had a chance to dry.
- ✘ Wear thick heavy-duty rubber gloves to fully dismantle tools, and use a stainless steel or glass bowl (not used for anything else) to clean tools.
- ✘ Scrub tools in hot water and detergent, rinse in hot running water, then scrub and soak tools in a sterilising solution (e.g. PeraSafe) for at least 20 minutes. Airdry tools and store in a sterile bag.

For the person receiving tatau

Before tattooing

- ✘ **Consent** - Every client must provide informed consent. It is your choice, so gather the information about the risks and process to make a safe choice. Your *Tufuga* should help you understand fully the process of the *tatau*, the risks involved and what to do if things go wrong. Those who are not yet 16 years much provide parental consent.
- ✘ **Medical Advice** - Talk to your GP first, especially about any existing health conditions you may have, like diabetes, that may impact on your healing.
- ✘ **Ask Questions** - Do not be afraid to ask questions to the *Tufuga* and your GP. Communicate your concerns and clarify information.
- ✘ **Clean Skin** - 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.

During tattooing

- ✘ Your tattooist/*Tufuga* and assistants should practise hygienic tattooing. Ask a trusted friend to assist or keep an eye out to ensure hygiene is observed, such as: the use of disposable gloves and eye protection; using newly prepared ink; the room is clean and smoking is not allowed; all equipment is sterilised.
- ✘ Talk with your *Tufuga* and agree 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.
- ✘ Ensure you receive clear 'after care' instructions to minimise pain and risk of wound infection.

After tattooing

- ✘ Wash hands before and after touching your tattooed area. Regular handwashing to eliminate germs.
- ✘ Pat the area gently with a dry and clean cloth if fluid is present. Make sure cloths are either disposed of or washed in hot water after each use.
- ✘ Wear clean, dry and loose clothing. Do not share bedding, clothing or towels.
- ✘ Avoid sunlight on the *tatau* as it heals.
- ✘ Avoid scratching the area. Take pain relief as needed and per medical instructions.
- ✘ **Watch out for:** increasing redness, soreness, swelling and presence of pus, fever, diarrhoea and boils. Any concerns about your health: contact your GP and inform your *Tufuga*.

References

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