

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



Pet project a potential life-saver

A four-year-old girl's near-death experience after being bitten by a kitten has inspired a University of Tasmania academic to devise a tool for the assessment of bite wounds.

A fold-out poster version of Janelle White's B.I.T.E.S tool is popping up in surgeries around Australia after being published in a recent edition of *Australian Doctor*, a magazine which is circulated to more than 20,000 GPs.

Mrs White, who lectures in paramedic practice at the University of Tasmania's Rozelle (Sydney) campus, said that the tool had been enthusiastically embraced by the health profession since its presentation at an international zoonoses conference organised by the Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases in July last year. (A zoonosis is disease of animals, such as rabies, that can be transmitted to humans.)

The impetus for the assessment tool was an emergency call that Mrs White, who is an extended-care paramedic, responded to. The four-year-old's mother had called triple-O after being unable to wake her daughter, who had a swollen arm.

"On the way to the hospital her mother recalled that she had come to her four days earlier, in tears, after being bitten by a kitten. There had been just a tiny pinprick of blood on her arm.

"If her mother had known that there was a more than 80 per cent chance of infection with a cat bite, then she would have gone to a doctor, who would have prescribed prophylactic antibiotics. But she didn't know that and her daughter nearly died."

Mrs White said that spider, snake and marine bites were a common educational focus in paramedic practice. "But no one talks about mammalian bites. So I chose four types: dog, cat, human and bat bites – two common, two high-risk, potentially fatal – and came up with five essential checkpoints (B.I.T.E.S - bite features; infections/injections; treatment/time; existing health considerations and symptoms and signs)."

After presenting at the zoonoses conference, she was approached by the Greencross Vets chain, seeking permission to display copies of her poster in their surgeries dotted around Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia. "From there it snowballed," she recalls, "particularly after an eight-year-old Cairns boy died in February from Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV)."

The boy had been scratched by a bat while on a family holiday to northern Queensland in December, and didn't tell his parents.

Three weeks later, he began to suffer convulsions and a fever. After another two weeks, his neurological condition worsened and he eventually went into a coma.

It was the third reported incident of the disease in Australia, all of which have been fatal.

"ABLV symptoms can present up to two years after a person is infected," Mrs White said. "It is similar to rabies."

Her assessment tool is now being assessed by the Victorian Department of Health for use on its Better Health Channel web site and the Queensland and Northern Territory health departments for use in hospital emergency departments. Yesterday (**2 July 2013**) she was advised that the SA Health would soon began distributing copies of the tool to Local Health Networks and Medicare Locals in that state.

The Editor of *Australian Doctor* has also asked her to contribute a regular column.

Mrs White has also started teaching zoonosis to paramedic students as part of a School of Medicine unit called Environmental Emergencies. "We are the only university to be doing this," she says proudly.

Link to *Australian Doctor* version of the B.I.T.E.S poster:

http://www.australiandoctor.com.au/getmedia/62b06cc1-07e9-4768-86cc-69e684467975/AD_TUbite_21JUN_13.aspx

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