An audit of dog-related injury notification practices in a New Zealand public hospital

Natasha Duncan-Sutherland, Calum Cunningham, Suzannah Cooper, Sylvia Boys

ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Dog bites and other dog-related injuries (DRIs) are an ongoing and increasing cause of unintentional injury in New Zealand. Secondary prevention strategies implemented primarily by animal management services following an incident with a dog rely on notification of incidents. Mandatory notification of DRIs is not currently required in New Zealand, however, is a strategy used internationally for either the purposes of rabies control or dog bite prevention.

AIM: This study aimed to investigate the rate of notification by health professionals to an appropriate authority, for all DRIs that presented during the 2018/19 year to a New Zealand public hospital, and to describe the incidence and characteristics of these presentations.

METHOD: Data were obtained from all discharges from a New Zealand public hospital, with the primary external cause of injury code W54.0 (Bitten by Dog) + W54.1 (Struck by Dog) or W54.8 (Other Contact with Dog) as per the Australian Modification of the 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, during the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019. Clinical notes were screened for documentation of notification of the incident to an appropriate authority, including local animal management, social work, Oranga Tamariki (NZ’s child protection services), or police.

RESULTS: There were 329 presentations to the emergency department with a DRI, 97% of which (n=320) were dog bites. There was a non-significant higher one-year cumulative incidence in children aged 0–9 years compared to adults aged 15 years and over. Children aged 0–9 years were also more likely to be injured on the head, face or neck, compared to adults or children 10–14 years, who were more likely to be injured on their limbs or torso. Notification of incidents were notified to an authority in 1.5% of incidents, including animal management services or a social worker.

CONCLUSION: This study found a low rate (1.5%) of documented notification by health professionals of dog bites and other DRIs. Further research is required to investigate the evidence for introducing strategies to increase reporting on the incidence of injuries, and any potential impact on presentations for medical attention.

Dog bites and other dog-related injuries (DRIs) are an increasing cause of unintentional injury in New Zealand, with an annual average of 21,665 Accident Compensation Company (ACC) claims for all DRIs during the 2014/15 to 2018/19 years, 10,951 of which were dog bite injuries. There were 2,869 DRIs occurring in children aged 0–14 years, of which 2,160 were dog bite injuries. Inequity also exists with higher rates of injury in more socio-economically deprived areas and in those of Māori ethnicity on a background of a socio-political environment that has resulted in the current inequity. Both ACC claims and hospitalisations increased over this time period, with a three-fold risk of being hospitalised from a dog bite injury compared to 30 years ago.

With an increasing prevalence of injury, prevention strategies become all the more important. Prevention strategies are primarily provided by animal management services within each local government area. Primary prevention focuses on education, dog-training, dog access and leash legislation, breed-specific restrictions, or stray dog management including registrations and microchipping.

Secondary prevention strategies implemented following an incident of dog aggression may include: further education to dog-owners or rehabilitation training; re-homing; enforced safety requirements such as fencing, muzzling, leashes or signage; sterilisation; infringements; or prosecution with restrictions on dog ownership or in more extreme cases, dog euthanasia. The need for secondary prevention is supported by studies showing that dogs who bite frequently have a history of dog aggression to either humans or animals. However this requires appropriate authorities becoming aware of incidents of dog aggression for enactment.

Members of the public are also able to report incidents of dog aggression. As with other significant public or child safety issues, health professionals...
and veterinarians can also report concerns with or without patient consent, and may also make reports of concern to other organisations such as police, social work or Oranga Tamariki (NZ’s child protection service).

Clinical practice guidelines at Middlemore Hospital Emergency Department (ED) encourages health practitioners to consider notification of dog bite injuries to Auckland animal management services with patient consent. However, it is unknown to what degree this is implemented. The importance of including all injuries caused by a dog has also been highlighted in a previous study of paediatric injuries, and in a more recent study of injuries caused by dogs in New Zealand.1

A related study The Epidemiology of Dog-Related Injuries, used DRI ACC claims and hospitalisations by territorial authority as two consistent measures of injury that can be monitored over time.1 The current audit is primarily aimed to measure notification practices by health professionals within a single DHB. This will be repeated following implementation of a revised notification guideline within the region.

**METHOD**

This study was guided by a Kaupapa Māori approach to research, with Māori involvement at all stages. The study developed following a suggestion by a member of the Independent Māori Statutory Board during consultation with the Auckland Council in the 2019 review of dog-access legislation, that health professionals take responsibility for notification of dog related injuries to animal management services.

Data were obtained from all discharges for ED presentations and hospitalisations to any department with the primary external cause of injury code W54.0 (Bitten by Dog) + W54.1 (Struck by Dog) or W54.8 (Other Contact with Dog) as per the Australian Modification of the 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD–10), during the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019.

Hospital discharge summaries and other relevant electronically accessible notes were reviewed. Secondary presentations for the same incident were removed. Notes were screened for documentation of incidents having been reported to an authority, including local animal management services, Oranga Tamariki, or police. Information from the animal management service, on whether incidents were reported, was not available. Further information regarding potential risk factors were collected for each unique event including: primary cause of injury code; prioritised ethnicity (Māori, Asian, Pacific Island, or Other); age; domicile; location of injury on the body; length of stay in hospital; number of operations required during the hospital stay. Notes were also searched for the geographical location of injury, including if this occurred in public or private.

Data were collected on Microsoft Excel, with the open-access website Open-Epi version 3.01+ used for statistical analysis. To calculate one-year cumulative incidence rates, population data from the 2018 census for the Counties Manukau District Health Board (DHB) were used.15 Given the categorical data, the two-tail mid-p exact test was used to compare differences between age and ethnic groups, with 95% confidence intervals reported. A p-value of <0.05 was considered a statistically significant result. The cumulative incidence of dog bites per year was also analysed by ethnicity. Age-specific rates were calculated for each five-year age category. Further comparison was made by age groups 0–9 years, 10–14 years and 15 years and over (adults), for consistency with a previous study.1

**RESULTS**

There were 329 presentations of DRIs to Middlemore Hospital during the 2018/19 fiscal year, with an incidence of 58.4 per 100,000 people per year (95% CI 52.3, 64.9). Three hundred and twenty of these were coded as dog bite injuries. Only nine were non-bite injuries (fractures, head injuries or scratches). Seven were police dog bite injuries. Twenty had no documentation; however, they were included in the analysis due to being coded as a DRI. There were no injuries with the ICD code W54.1 (Struck by dog).

**Age**

Of 329 patients presenting with a DRI, 19.5% (n=64) were children aged 0–9 years, 6.7% (n=22) were children aged 10–14 years, and 73.9% (n=243) were adults aged 15 years and over (Table 1). Within the 0–4 age group, five victims were 1–2 years old, and seven victims were 2–3 years of age.

While the one-year cumulative incidence was higher in children aged 0–9 years (76.6 per 100,000; 95% CI 59.5, 97.2) compared to adults (58.6 per 100,000; 95% CI 51.6, 66.3), this was not statistically significant (p=0.062) (Figure 1). There was also no significant difference between the 10–14-year age group (55.4 per 100,000; 95% CI 35.6, 83.9) and adults (p= 0.825) (Figure 1). There was no identifiable trend across the age group categories (Figure 2).
Table 1: DRIs in 2018/19 year by age group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Incidence per 100,000 people (95% CIs)</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–9 years</td>
<td>76.6 (59.5, 97.2)</td>
<td>64 (19.5%)</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–14 years</td>
<td>55.4 (35.6, 83.9)</td>
<td>22 (6.7%)</td>
<td>0.825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years and over</td>
<td>58.6 (51.6, 66.3)</td>
<td>243 (73.9%)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Cumulative Incidence of DRI’s per 100,000 people in 2018/19 year by age group.

Figure 2: Cumulative Incidence of DRI’s per 100,000 people in 2018/19 year by five-year age groups.
**Ethnicity**

The cumulative incidence was significantly higher in Māori (111.0 per 100,000; 95% CI 90.5, 134.8) compared to all non-Māori (43.9 per 100,000; 95% CI 38.5, 49.9, p<0.001 (Table 2). Rates were lowest in those of Asian ethnicity (20.2 per 100,000; 95% CI 14.0,28.3), with higher rates also present in the Pacific Island ethnic group (70.8 per 100,000; 95% CI 57.7, 86.1).

**Severity of injuries**

Injuries to children aged 0–9 years were more likely to occur on the head, face or neck region (64%, n=41/64), compared to adults and children aged 10–14 years, who were more likely to be injured on the torso or limbs (50%, n=11/22, and 83%, n=202/243, respectively). Multiple injuries occurred in 8% of children aged 0–9 years (n=5/64), 23% of 10–14 years (n=5/22), and in 8% of adults (20/243).

Half of patients presenting were hospitalised (50%, n=166/329), with 66% of these (n=110/166) requiring operative management with a general anaesthetic, and 7% (n=12/166) needing more than one. The average length of stay was 4.4 hours, in 87% of cases where this was recorded. Six per cent of patients (n=19/329) re-presented with cellulitis, following their initial presentation.

**Circumstances**

Eighteen percent (n=58/329) of clinical notes had the geographical location of injury described. Of these, 62% (n=36/58) were in public places, including six attacks described as being by stray dogs; 21% (n=12/58) occurred in the home; 14% (n=8/58) at the property of a friend, neighbour or family member; and 10% (n=6/58) were following a worker entering a private property. Very few notes (10%, n=34/329) described the relationship of the dog to the victim. Most injuries occurred in people residing in Counties Manukau DHB (68%, n=224/329). Fifteen percent (n=50/329) resided in Auckland DHB, 9% (n=30/329) in Waitematā DHB, and 2% (n=6/329) were overseas residents.

**Notification rates**

Five injuries were documented as being reported to an authority (1.5%). Four were reported to local animal management services, and one to a social worker. Victims of incidents that were reported were aged 8 years, 14 years, 7 years, and 50 years. Two other health professionals documented having a safety discussion (with victims aged 12 years and 6 years). One other patient (60 years old) had made a report to an animal management service prior to ED attendance. All victims with documented notification or safety discussions identified as being of Pacific Island or Māori ethnicity.

**DISCUSSION**

Patterns of injury were comparable to previous studies showing higher rates of DRIs in children compared to adults, with children more likely to be hospitalised or receive bites to the head/neck region.16–18 This is in contrast to a more recent study using a broader measure of injuries presenting for any medical attention, including within the community, showing similar rates of injury in children and adults.1 While the circumstances around DRIs have not been well studied in children, most likely the head/neck injuries are due to their height relative to a dog.

The finding of a higher rate of injury in Māori is also consistent with previous studies.1,16 The reasons for this are uncertain, but may be explained.

### Table 2: DRIs in 2018/19 year by ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethic Group</th>
<th>Māori</th>
<th>All non-Māori (Asian, PI, Other)</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Pacific Island</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incidence per 100,000 people (95% CI)</td>
<td>111.0 (90.5, 134.8)</td>
<td>43.9 (38.5, 49.9)</td>
<td>20.2 (14.0, 28.3)</td>
<td>70.8 (57.7, 86.1)</td>
<td>43.9 (36.1, 53.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of injuries</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population identifying as ethnic group</td>
<td>87,375</td>
<td>528,162</td>
<td>153,594</td>
<td>135,519</td>
<td>239,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p&lt;0.001</td>
<td>p&lt;0.001</td>
<td>p=0.002</td>
<td>p&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
by differences in rates of dog ownership, socio-economic deprivation on a background of the ongoing effects of colonisation, or inequity of investment into culturally appropriate prevention strategies. A key component of secondary prevention strategies in reducing inequity will require empowerment of Māori with involvement of Māori-led services.

The incidence of injury 58.4 per 100,000 people per year (95% CI 52.3, 64.9) was low compared to ACC claims within the South Eastern Auckland Region (220 per 100,000 people), demonstrating that many people with DRIs present to community health centres rather than to hospital, consistent with a recent New Zealand study. Likewise, the plastic surgery department for the Auckland Region is also located at Middlemore Hospital, with patient referrals received from outside the Counties Manukau DHB area.

While 64% of injuries occurred in public places, the accuracy of this result was limited by the number of discharges where this was documented (18%). This is in contrast to a previous study showing a higher rate of injuries in private places, and is likely a reflection of the inaccuracy of medical notes as a method for investigating the circumstances surrounding an injury. The residential address of a victim may also not reflect the location of injury, particularly given injuries frequently occur when either visiting a property or in public.

The low rate of notification of injuries was surprising given the severity of injuries that presented. Eighty-six injuries occurred in children aged 0–14 years; 93 occurred on the head/neck, 30 victims had injuries in multiple locations, 166 were hospitalised; and 110 required a general anaesthetic with operative management—yet only five had documented notification.

The low notification rate found in this study is, however, consistent with international studies of presentations to emergency departments showing a paucity of dog bite reporting by health professionals. A UK study found only 4% of clinicians in one hospital made a follow-up referral to a social or health worker relating to dog safety in 160 paediatric patients presenting to an emergency department with a dog bite. Although, this increased to 38% when a paediatric liaison team retrospectively reviewed all notes for the purpose of identifying child protection issues. A Canadian study showed that of 302 people with dog bite injuries presenting to an emergency department, only 19.5% were reported to either public health (for rabies prevention) or to police, and only 1% had a safety or preventive discussion.

Other studies showing a lack of reporting of DRIs in New Zealand include a survey of 535 adults presenting for medical attention for a dog bite in 2002, showing that only 30% of dog bite injuries were reported to an authority. Likewise, a survey of 228 New Zealand veterinary students, revealing a high lifetime incidence of dog bites (38%), found that only 5% were reported to authorities. Similar results are reflected internationally. An online survey conducted in the UK with self-identified dog bite victims showed no further action was taken in over half of dog bite incidents (53%). Likewise, a study in Ireland found that dog bites frequently went unreported in both non-legislated (72.7%) and legislated breeds (45%).

New Zealand’s lack of implementation of safety standards around dogs with a history of aggression poses a risk of further serious harm to people living within the home, or those in surrounding houses and local community. This is of particular concern for children, who may have aggressive dogs living with or near them, including schools or playgrounds, without adequate safety precautions. Improved reporting would also enable implementation of secondary prevention strategies for injuries occurring within private spaces, which, in turn, are less likely to be reported.

Notification to animal management services also

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3: Number of reported dog attacks on people, compared to ACC claims for DRIs within the Auckland Region.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dog attacks on people reported to Auckland animal management service</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auckland animal management service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC claims for dog bite injuries only within the Auckland Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC claims for all DRIs within the Auckland Region</td>
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</table>
allows for more accurate knowledge of geographical areas in which to focus strategies, improved monitoring of incidents over time, and presents an opportunity to increase dog-registrations, resulting in further financial investment into prevention strategies. As can be seen in table three, services may report a decrease in dog bite rates, when this apparent decline is due to under-reporting, and rates are in fact increasing. Of note, some reports to animal management may be from people who have not presented for medical attention.

Reasons for under-reporting by the public may be because the blame for dog bites can be directed toward the victim with a reluctance to accept the aggressive behaviour of dogs,26–29 because people underestimate the risk27 particularly if it is their own dog,7 or if there is a less severe injury or non-legislated breed.21 Under-reporting may also occur because people are reluctant to report their own dog or a dog that is known to them, out of concerns for the consequences to the dog including the potential for euthanasia, or because of fear of retribution by the dog owner.

Most countries, including New Zealand, do not have national mandatory notification policies for dog bite and other DRIs for the purposes of dog bite prevention. Some hospitals in the UK and US have local notification practices for dog bite injuries—usually to police—with geographical disparities in reporting rates due to the lack of national policy.30 Other countries have notification policies for the purposes of rabies prevention.20,31 Switzerland is the only country with national mandatory notification in place for the purposes of reducing dog bites, with 40% of physicians reporting at least half of dog bites presenting for medical attention after the strategy was introduced in 2006, which were thought to be the most relevant cases.32 There was a subsequent reduction in insurance claims for DRIs from 3,600 in 2005, to 2,500 in 2007.33

The most common reason that physicians and veterinarians in Switzerland gave for not wanting to report a DRI, was that they did not want to break confidentiality when the patient was the owner of the dog, or if the patient did not want it reported because it was a minor injury, or because they were unaware of the requirement.32 There may also be concerns around deterring patients from presenting for medical attention.

However, with higher rates observed in Māori children this is clearly an equity issue, and mandatory notification to an appropriate authority may improve safety for our children. Likewise, patients and professionals may prefer mandatory notification, as removing a barrier to reporting may allow them to have the incident notified while maintaining relationships. The challenges of reporting dog-related issues within small communities were recognised in a qualitative study of a small Indigenous community in Northern Australia.34 A further study in a small Indigenous community in Canada with a high level of community involvement also promoted reporting as part of the strategy.35 This is an area for future research in the New Zealand context.

The main limitation of this study is the investigation of documented notification only. Some incidents may have been reported by either the patient or health professional, but not documented. There may be variable accuracy of documentation by health practitioners, coding administration staff or the data analyst. The number of non-bite DRIs was low, and may be due to inaccuracy in coding for injury caused by a dog.

CONCLUSION

This study found a low rate (1.5%) of documented notification by health professionals of dog bites and other DRIs. Further research is required to investigate the evidence for introducing strategies to increase reporting on the incidence of injuries and any potential impact on presentations for medical attention.
COMPETING INTERESTS
Nil

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