

# **SOUTHWESTERN NEWS**

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## **PHYSICIANS TREAT PATIENTS OF DOG ATTACKS, OFFER ADVICE ON PREVENTION**

DALLAS - January 7, 1998 - When a Rottweiler sheared the scalp off a 3-year-old boy in Austin, attending physicians called upon plastic surgeons at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas to reconstruct the child's delicate head and neck region. It was the second such complex reconstructive procedure performed by UT Southwestern physicians on a toddler in recent months resulting from a dog attack.

"We've seen an increase in tragic cases involving children and dog attacks," said Dr. William Adams, assistant professor of plastic surgery. "A significant portion of the 3 million dog attacks on children each year could be prevented with education. Eighty percent of dogs that attack children belong to a friend or family member of the child and aren't strays."

Some people commonly purchase a dog because they think it will prevent them from becoming the victim of a crime. But according to United States Humane Society statistics, the probability that the victim of a fatal dog bite is a burglar is only one in 177.

"Between 1979 and 1996, there were 304 fatalities from dog bites reported in the United States," said Dr. Charles Ginsburg, chairman of pediatrics at UT Southwestern. "The breed of dog involved in the attacks on children varied; however, Rottweilers, pit bulls and German shepherds accounted for greater than 50 percent of all fatal bite-related injuries."

Adams, along with Drs. Jeffrey Kenkel and Jamie Burt, conducted an intricate, multiphased scalp reconstruction on the 3-year-old. The operation at Children's Medical Center of Dallas involved placing vascularized tissue - tissue with its own blood supply - over the child's exposed skull.

Six hours went by as surgeons cut, clipped and sutured. They used needles and sutures so minute that they look like pieces of lint to the naked eye. Matchstick-sized, foam-tipped spatulas that serve to soak up blood quickly filled a stainless-steel tray. Some of these same doctors and

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nurses also took part in a 39-hour reconstruction of the face of another toddler mauled by a family dog two months ago.

In the intricate, free-tissue transfer procedure, Kenkel, an assistant professor of plastic surgery, and Burt, a craniofacial fellow in plastic surgery, harvested two muscles from the toddler's back. Using cauterizing tools and blood-flow-controlling clips, they detached the muscles while leaving their blood supply intact. Adams found an appropriately sized artery and veins in the neck region that could act as conduits for the transferred tissue and its vascular system.

In the second phase of the free-tissue transfer, Kenkel and Burt, wearing magnifying loupe glasses, alternated assisting Adams under a crane-like microscope as they reattached the blood supply in the head and neck to allow the harvested muscles to resurface the previously exposed skull. Finally, a skin graft from the boy's back was used to cover the muscle that now carpets the child's skull.

"The goal of this stage of the reconstruction is to obtain stable coverage of the wound and skull," Adams said. "At a second stage, we will restore hair-bearing tissue via tissue expansion."

According to the United States Humane Society, 70 percent of dog bites are inflicted on children under age 10.

"These are truly devastating injuries for the children involved," said Adams. "In the fortunate cases, we can repair the injuries; however, this involves multiple procedures. The most important aspect is prevention, and most attacks on children are potentially preventable.

"I would urge all parents to never leave young children around any dog unattended. Chows, pit bulls, Rottweilers and Doberman pinschers should probably never be allowed near young children because of their histories of vicious attacks."

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***How to reduce the risk of serious injury from household pets:***

- During prenatal visits and routine health maintenance examinations, parents should discuss the risks of having potentially biting pets in the household.
- Parents should be cautious and well-informed about harboring exotic animals for pets.
- Parents should be aware of the proclivity of certain breeds of dogs to inflict serious injuries.
- All young children should be closely supervised, particularly when in the presence of animals, and, from an early age, taught to respect animals and to be aware of their potential to inflict injury.

Source: Nelson Textbook, "Animal and Human Bites," by Dr. Charles M. Ginsburg.

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