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Once bitten

■ Since I started commissioning articles for this 'Bites' issue of *Australian Family Physician*, I have been collecting unusual bite stories. So far the winner of the 'most unusual' award goes to a wombat bite sustained while skiing. The victim was the daughter of Meg A'Hearn, our editorial assistant. Meg's daughter, Vivien, came off her skis and found herself lying next to a wombat, the wombat responded by digging his teeth into Vivien's thigh!

A close second for the 'most unusual' award is a bite sustained by a patient I saw at Werribee Mercy Hospital Emergency Department a few years ago. The patient worked at Werribee Open Range Zoo and had been bitten by a spotted hyena who woke up from sedation a little earlier than expected! An occupational hazard for a zoo keeper, perhaps, but a very uncommon bite in Australia.

The article, 'Management of mammalian bites', by Claire Dendle and David Looke in this issue of *AFP*, reports that the majority of mammalian bites in Australia are from dogs, with breeds such as pitbull terriers and rottweilers over-represented in the statistics. I own a rottweiler and, while I see him as 50 kg of soft hairy love, I know that if I was attacked he would rise to the occasion and that the attacker would most likely come off second best.

A few years ago, I was bitten by a dog. The dog was a small, white fluffy thing, a maltese shitzu cross. His family had just moved house and he was a little out of sorts. I approached him as I usually would a dog: with a little hello and a hand out to offer a pat. All of a sudden he leapt up and attached himself to my face. He clung on for a moment and the result was a 1.5 cm laceration to my lip. The wound was sutured with my vermilion line well opposed so you can hardly see it. However, my memory of that day is still strong. I remember the shock and fear that accompanied the bite. The experience has not stopped me loving dogs, but it has certainly made me more wary of them. If my attacker had been a bigger or more aggressive dog my injuries may have been much worse. I am not surprised that, as Dendle and Looke point out in their article, dog attacks may be complicated by psychological trauma.

In my practice, I often ask patients about their pets. Pet ownership can have an enormously positive effect on people's lives. They can be great companions and, dogs in particular, can encourage

people to be physically active. As a dog owner I know it is much more difficult to skip your daily walk when a pair of brown eyes beg you to take them to the park. On more than one occasion, a patient with depression has told me that their dog is their only reason for living.

Pets are an integral part of the lives of many Australians. There are certainly risks as well as benefits to pet ownership. However, most of these risks can be minimised by simple measures such as choosing the right pet, good socialisation and training, and not leaving dogs alone with small children.

Like it or not, we also share our lives with biting insects including spiders, bed bugs and mosquitoes. In their article, 'Bed bugs: A guide for the GP', Stephen Doggett and Richard Russell explain how general practitioners can identify and treat affected patients and work with institutions to eliminate infestations. In her article, 'Dengue: Clinical and public health ramifications', Danielle Esler discusses dengue virus infection in the context of a recent outbreak of the disease in northern Queensland. In their article, 'Spider bites: Assessment and management', George Braitberg and Leslie Segal describe toxidromes that may be caused by specific spider bites and dispel some myths about the white tailed spider.

Most GPs will never encounter a patient with a wombat or hyena bite. Dog, cat, human and insect bites are much more common, and GPs need to know how to deal with the sequelae and public health ramifications of these. In Claire Dendle and David Looke's article we are reminded that human bites have a higher complication and infection rate than other animal bites. I find this thought quite levelling: a little reminder that we humans are not as separate as we might imagine from the animal kingdom.

