



Skin donation shortage leaving bushfire victims at risk, tissue bank warns

ABC [7.30](#) Report

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PHOTO: [Kate Sanderson suffered serious burns when she was caught in a bushfire during a sporting event four years ago.](#)(Supplied)

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Australia is facing a critical shortage of donated tissue, including skin, bones, heart valves and tendons.

"We're short in everything, absolutely everything," Donor Tissue Bank of Victoria senior scientist Kellie Hamilton said.

"We desperately need skin to be able to treat burns. We're coming into bushfire season and that's always a critical time for us."

Kate Sanderson was racing in an ultra-marathon in Western Australia's Kimberley four years ago when she received burns to 65 per cent of her body after becoming caught in a fire.

"We tried to run up a hill ... we had nowhere else to go and we were hoping there was a road up the top, and I just didn't get that far. The fire just outran me really quickly," she said.

Ms Sanderson spent six months in hospital in Melbourne where she received dozens of life-saving skin grafts.

There was enough skin in Victoria to treat her burns, but fellow runner Turia Pitt was less fortunate.

Her doctors in NSW were forced to import skin from the USA which was then held up at the airport — putting her life at risk due to infection.

Donors fear being stripped of skin: surgeon

According to 2014 figures, the latest statistics available, only 165 people donated skin in Australia.

The Tissue Bank said they frequently ran out of skin.

"The classic example of that is the Black Saturday bushfires," Ms Hamilton said.

Tissue donation gives teen new life



Hamish Pownall was born with a leaky aortic heart valve. A transplant could help him lead the life he's always imagined.

"We had been treating two patients in the local burns unit leading up to the Black Saturday bushfires, and unfortunately we had low stock right at that time.

"It was a very difficult period for us and we had to get skin from overseas."

Human skin, which is the best option for seriously burnt patients because synthetic tissue has no resistance to bacteria, is retrieved after a person has died and often it is the family who decides whether to donate.

Burns surgeon Heather Cleland said many people were reluctant to tick the box for skin donation because they thought they would be stripped of their skin.

She said donating involved removing a small patch of skin from the back and upper legs.

"It's not the sort of thing that some people imagine, it's not a mutilating procedure, it's something we do to ordinary surgical patients to achieve wound healing," she said.

Husband 'lives on' in tissue, organ recipients: wife

Marina Adams' husband Jack died suddenly from a heart attack three years ago. He had just retired from his job as a house painter.



PHOTO: [Jack Adams' organs and tissue helped 30 people, including one patient who wrote to his wife to express their thanks.](#) (Supplied)

Ms Adams and her family agreed to donate his organs and tissue.

"It wasn't harrowing because it was something he wanted, it was something the family were happy about," she said.

"He's helped many burns victims and his bones have been used for a 14-year-old boy [with] cerebral palsy. He's helped about 30 people. He still lives on."

Ms Adams has even received letters of thanks from the corneal recipient, who can now paint again.

The letter read: "I hope you feel that my thanks is from my heart and not just a word on paper. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

At 40 years old, Ms Sanderson just had her last operation.

She credits generous donors with her survival and said she was recovering well — back studying and even racing.

"I can't run yet, because I've got half my foot amputated, but, walking. I've done a few Oxfam trail-walks and adventure races and long bike rides. So, I'm getting back to 90 per cent of what I was doing," she said.

Ms Hamilton urged people to tick the box for tissue donation.

"We want people to say yes. This is really critical. This saves lives. The skin in these tanks prevents people from dying while they're being treated in hospital."

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