

4-14-12 Keeping Rabies a Rare Disease

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 55,000 people die (worldwide) each year, mostly from bites from unvaccinated dogs. Here, in the United States, where a human death from rabies is rare, we sometimes forget how good things are. One of the mechanisms in place maintaining the rewards of a rabies-free life is our linking of dog licenses with proof of rabies vaccinations. This simple requirement is one of the most effective health promotion programs in history.

There is far more to this deadly disease than preventing it in dogs, however. People must be aware of how they can be exposed, recognizing the occurrence of or even the possibility of exposure and what to do if they have been exposed. You see, rabies is deadly; no maybe about it. You get it; you die. If you have been exposed, and you recognize the exposure, you can be treated with a series of shots that will save your life by preventing you from actually developing the disease. In that scenario, time is of the essence but there is enough time.

Now, if a crazy acting fox or skunk or coyote jumps out of the woods, attacks some inanimate objects, staggers around and then bites you, you know you'll call the police and your doctor. (Also, wash that wound immediately to reduce the amount of virus left there by the bite!)

But would you see the potential for exposure if you lured an animal into a cage and it hissed at you? Would you see the potential for exposure if your young child woke up to find a bat in his or her room? How about if you wacked a bat in your home, put it in a Cheerios box and placed it in the fridge? What if you allowed your children to leave the car to see the cute baby raccoon? What if you let your dog out at night, heard it growl and yelp in a scuffle with a wild animal and then you carefully checked your poor pooch to see if it was hurt? These are just a few of the many actual instances of humans interacting with wild animals in my little town.

They all were potentially exposed with the exception of the mother calling her children to come see the cute baby raccoon. I saw that one from the town hall window and told the woman to get back in her car. The man who thought he had a dead bat became curious, opened the box and the dazed bat flew out and bit him. The bat was caught again, killed and submitted to our State Lab, where it tested positive for rabies.

I continue to be amazed by the variety of ways people willingly, yet unknowingly, potentially expose themselves to rabies. The bat/Cheerios man's life was saved with Post Exposure Prophylactic vaccine. The family that lured a raccoon into a cage one Fourth of July evening, put themselves in danger by doing so and the mother was sent to her physician for medical advice because she approached the cage and the raccoon hissed at her. Saliva from a rabid animal carries the virus. If it gets into your eyes, you have been exposed.

In the case of the hissing raccoon, there were some gaps in the proper response and communications, with the captured raccoon being killed and disposed without testing. In that case, we must presume positive and treat the person. Better safe than sorry but even better is to avoid the contact.

Interviewing the people who report sightings of wild animals is critical for guiding the appropriate response. Each case is different. If there was no contact and the animal is confirmed as acting sick or strange by our trained Animal Control Officers, the wild animal might be killed and disposed. If the event happened in a densely populated area, the response might include a reverse 911 call to alert people of the potential for exposure with instructions to call the Board of Health. If there are only a few houses around, I might go door to door, informing each household of the situation. When in doubt, the Animal Control Officer can hold the wild animal in a refrigerator or freezer and submit for testing later.

These situations highlight the importance of communication between the Local Board of Health and the Police Department, where the Animal Control Officers usually work. It is one of many public health situations requiring cooperation between departments. Practice, Protocol and Policy makes an almost perfect response. Saving a life is well worth the effort of establishing that policy and practicing the protocol with dispatchers, officers and agents.

April is Rabies Awareness Month. Halifax will hold their Rabies Clinic on Saturday, April 14 from 9 to 11 A.M. at the Highway Barn, Hemlock Ln. The shot costs 10 dollars (nine for seniors). That's a good deal!

Want to help reduce rabies worldwide? Currently the CDC rabies program is assisting in rabies prevention programs in the Philippines and Central Africa. Your gift of as little as \$10 can vaccinate 10 dogs, ensuring they cannot transmit rabies; buy the first dose of rabies vaccine to protect an exposed child; or educate 150 children about protecting themselves against rabies. See the CDC website to make a donation. <http://www.cdcfoundation.org/rabies>

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