

11-07-14 Rash of Rabies

We have experienced a rash of animal incidents in Halifax lately. I thought the slew of cat, rat and bat were quite enough for a while. And they were, with the bat testing positive for rabies and a family having to talk with their family physician and an epidemiologist at our Department of Public Health (DPH) to determine if they should receive the series of prophylactic shots.

Rabies is nothing to play around with. You get it, you die. However, if you have been exposed to the virus, through a bite or scratch or even the animal's saliva getting into your mucous membranes such as your eyes, or contacting your blood, such into a small cut, your life can be saved with the preventive vaccine. The animal's brain is tested at our DPH lab and it takes hours to a day and half or so to get the results. DPH is really wonderful the way they handle these cases, with a call directly to me and the affected family as soon as they receive the results. There is plenty of time to wait (albeit it anxiously) for the news. Not rabid? No need for the shots. Tested as positive for rabies and you were exposed? Go get started on the shots to save your life, with, by the way, full confidence in both the State lab's results and the efficacy of the vaccine. There aren't a lot of situations where we can say that. So often treatment or prevention methods are "iffy"; let's cross our fingers and hope. The rabies protocol is all backed up with decades of research, resulting in confidence if (key word there, "if") people cooperate, tell us the whole story, and follow instructions.

The other scenario requiring following instructions, cooperation and judgment calls is that of quarantine. While the public is being made keenly aware of quarantine in connection with Ebola, it has been used successfully for centuries. Sometimes whole ships were quarantined off shore, with food and water being sent to the ship by methods avoiding contact.

With rabies, there has been so much research with cats, dogs and ferrets that it is known that a ten day quarantine is enough time to know if that animal was infectious at the time of exposure to another animal or to a human. The cat, dog or ferret (remember when they were the craze of children's request as a pet?) had a "bite of unknown source" or perhaps was in a scuffle with a raccoon and the raccoon ran off into the woods. The pet needs to be quarantined for ten days. If that potential source of rabies, say that raccoon, was infectious (shedding the virus) at the time exposure, your pet will show obvious signs of rabies such as severe aggression, or extreme lethargy and illness, with death soon to follow. If humans have been exposed, they will begin the preventive vaccine. This protocol works and saves thousands of lives every year in the continental United States. There are other countries where rabies is rampant, with roaming dogs being a prime vector and thousands of people dying from the disease. According the World health organization, 55,000 people die each year from rabies, mostly in Asia and Africa.

I am not sure if you realize and appreciate what prevents people from dying from rabies in the USA. There are a few measures we have in place saving lives and these measures must be maintained. A simple but effective health promotion program assisting us in this success story is the requirement for rabies vaccination in our dogs. Our Town Clerks help us to make this program succeed by requiring dog licenses and offering discounts to people who get that on time

and fines for late applications. Carrots and sticks. Your Local Board of Health offers Rabies Clinics, usually in April, at a discounted price, to motivate people to do the right thing at an affordable price.

Along with the Town clerk and Local Board of Health, you have year round involvement from and cooperation between your Animal Control Officer and your Animal Inspector. Whom they work for and how many hours they are allotted varies town to town. Communication between them and the Board of Health is key, though. When the Animal Control Officer has responded to an off leash dog, he or she can handle that, independent of other agencies. When there has been a bite, though, it is time for the Animal Inspector to quarantine a pet and there are conversations, meetings and updates between Animal Control, Animal Inspector, Health Agent and the involved families. The protocol works consistently. It takes time, though, and cooperation. It is the people involved who vary and complicate matters.

Stay tuned for next week's follow-up on variations and complications. In the meantime, appreciate your town officials and the animal regulations, for they are saving lives.

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