

4-19-19 Rabies Awareness

I cried when I watched my first public health campaign. I was just a girl, not a health agent, watching the movie, *Old Yeller*. That great big previously lovable dog snarled viciously as it succumbed to rabies after saving the boy's life by fighting a rabid wolf. The family quarantined their dog in order to save their own lives. Quarantining is still necessary today for rabies is as deadly as ever. There is no treatment for the illness once a human has contracted it. We can only prevent it. (The series of shots you have heard about is to prevent rabies when contact is suspected or proven. It is not a treatment.) Despite another very effective public health campaign of baiting food with vaccine for raccoons, rabies still exists, with raccoons, foxes and feral cats high on the list. If you feed feral cats, please help society by vaccinating and neutering those animals.

While April is Rabies Awareness Month, it is always time to be aware of rabies as a fatal disease of the nervous system, spread by the neurotropic viruses in the family *Rhabdoviridae*, genus *Lyssavirus*. Who wouldn't want to prevent a fatal infection? Around the world, rabies kills more than 59,000 people every year. The most affected countries are in Africa and Asia, and almost half of the victims are children under the age of 15.

While we might take it for granted that New England has a long history of a very successful rabies prevention program, other parts of the United States are behind in those efforts.

About half of the United States has laws for vaccinating cats and dogs for rabies, about one sixth have laws for dogs only and about one third of our States have no laws for vaccinating cats or dogs for rabies, according to CDC (Center for Disease Control & Prevention). That's amazing! I am glad to be living in New England where efforts to halt and prevent the spread of rabies has been successful for several decades. Those efforts are multi-modal and represent one of the most successful health promotion programs.

One prong of that program is the dog license. We must license our dogs and in order to get that little metal tag, we also must vaccinate our pooch for rabies.

Another prong of this successful program is education. That's where you and I and parents come in. Teach the children well. "Pat your own; Leave others alone." "Don't wait; Vaccinate." "Wash the wound." "If you see something, say something."

The last part is the trickiest. Will you tell someone if what you saw seems to be ordinary and acceptable? Probably not. That is why it is so important to teach children. They are more likely to pat, touch, play with or have contact with animals and less likely to tell adults about their interaction.

I recall the time I was about to leave a horse show after inspecting the food service, I noticed a little girl and she was holding her hand out toward a little dog, as if to indicate the

command of “Stay”. And the little dachshund mix was obeying. I stopped because the little girl looked so concerned. Something didn’t look right. She was worried about this dog, it seemed. I lowered my car window and asked if everything was okay. She told me how worried she was because the dog had run away from the area of the trailers and she did not want the dog to run out to the street. In her attempt to stop the dog, she told me that she had already been “nipped a little bit”. That was all I had to hear. It was time to get out and talk to the girl and see if I could find the dog’s owners.

I do praise and admire her heart-warming dedication to and love of animals. That was evident. But she had put herself at risk and did not seem to recognize being “nipped a little” as a risk. In fact, she equated it to a dog she had at one time that used to nip sometimes but then became friendlier and would “lick her to death”. Piaget would say that she had filtered the current experience through her happy ending story of the past.

With the knowledge that her skin had not been broken and an order to not touch the pup again, I left to find the owners, for she indicated the area it first ran from. I did succeed in finding them and they just laughed, shaking their heads at the idea that this girl was interfering. They advised to leave the dog alone and the puppy would return on her own. Then, they added this: “Don’t touch the dog because she’ll probably bite!”

The Halifax Board of Health and Dr. Finney of VCA Hanson will offer a rabies clinic on April 20, 2019 at the Town Highway Barn, Hemlock Lane from 9 to 11 a.m. Please bring proof that last year’s shot was less than a year ago (even one day) in order to be eligible for the three-year booster. Vaccine cost is \$12. All are welcome. You do not have to be a Halifax resident. Make checks out to VCA Hanson.

Enjoy the animal parade, from Chihuahua to cat to Great Dane. Health promotion and having fun add up to a great day!

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