

Rabies: It Won't Wait

It seems rather strange in this world of scientific magic where so much has been achieved that we can't help a person who contracts rabies. The disease is a virus that is carried in the saliva, entering the central nervous system of the host through a bite or a non-bite exposure (saliva), causing an encephalomyelitis that is fatal. Viruses are challenging to combat. Antibiotics won't help. When a person gets rabies; that person dies. We can only prevent it. We can prevent it by reducing the cases among animals, by being mindful of our behaviors and, if we have been exposed to rabies, we can prevent the disease with quick medical attention, for there is a preventive vaccination.

Being mindful of our behaviors and receiving swift medical attention are critical for saving lives. Both were needed in recent weeks in Plympton and Halifax. As Golde said to her husband, Tevye in *The Fiddler on the Roof*, "Hurry up, the sun won't wait for you."

That is how I feel when I discover that people have been potentially exposed to rabies. We have to hurry up and do the right thing to save a life because the rabies virus marches on, waiting for no one. The virus can enter our bodies in several different ways. The most obvious is by a bite, unless it is from a bat and then it might not be so obvious. We can be exposed by scratches. And perhaps the most furtive form is by exposure to saliva. The saliva has to enter the person via a scratch in the skin (or thin spot, as from eczema) or the animal's saliva can enter the eyes or other mucous membranes via spitting/hissing at a person. And unhappy animals do hiss and spit and snarl and drool.

When it comes to dog bites, we have to hurry up and quarantine the dog that bit someone. The quarantine is for ten days. If the dog is healthy at the end of the ten days, the person who was bitten is wounded but safe from rabies. That is a huge relief.

When a dog owner refuses to quarantine their dog that is a problem requiring a hurry up solution. The animal inspector can return to the household with a police officer in an attempt to convince them of the importance of their cooperation. If that does not succeed, the animal inspector needs to go to the court to request an administrative warrant to return and insist on the quarantine or even to remove the dog to a shelter that will handle the quarantine. In that case, the dog owner would pay the shelter costs because of their refusal to quarantine their pet. As I write this, I do not know the end of that story. But I will soon find out.

Another situation requiring hurrying up to do the right thing involved a fox. The fox was sick and lethargic enough that a well-meaning compassionate eighteen year old picked it up and brought it home. Yup. Brought it home. The parents helped to place the sick fox in a cardboard box and told their son to get in the shower. Fox in a box. Shortly thereafter, they checked the box and the fox was gone. Fox out of a box. It is a wild animal, after all, and even sick wild animals don't want to be captured.

Shortly after the great escape, another young man, right around the corner from the fox in the box incident, felt badly for what he thought was a dehydrated fox. So, he initially kept it in the shade of the bushes and provided water. That person at least had the wherewithal to call the police. By the time the police arrived, the fox was in a dog crate. Fox in a crate is not great.

Unfortunately, this second young man misunderstood the situation and allegedly ordered the police to put the fox in their cruiser and deliver it to an animal rescue place.

Although it is not the job of police officers to transport sick animals, it is the job of the animal inspector or animal control officer to make a determination as to whether or not this animal needs to be shot by the police and submitted for testing. Unfortunately, that was not possible. Someone decided to let the fox go because it was not aggressive. That was a mistake. Foxes, raccoons, coyotes, skunks, woodchucks and bats are high on the list of wild animals carrying rabies. Firstly, the fox made the list. Secondly, aggression is only one possible symptom. Other possible symptoms of rabies include partial paralysis, circling or staggering as if drunk and acting unnaturally tame (think fox in a box).

By the time the animal inspector arrived, there was no fox to see but there were plenty of families on a hot day strolling back and forth on their way to the pool at a densely populated area.

That fox should have been shot and tested. Because it was let go, I had to talk to and write letters to both parties about the potential exposure to rabies and the need for them to have a serious discussion with their family physician. I was not there and I have no way of knowing if they touched saliva and then touched their own eyes, for instance. It is extremely easy for that to happen and to be completely unaware of it.

This is why the local board of health, animal control officers, animal inspectors, police officers and police dispatchers must be well informed and ask a lot of questions when people call in to report dog bites and strange acting animals. We need to know whether or not there was any chance of exposure. If there was any chance, then we cannot afford to take any more. We need to hurry up, because the sun does not wait and neither does the rabies virus.

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http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/foxes/tips/solving_problems_with_foxes.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/