

10-31-14 Rats, Bats and Cats

Just in time for Halloween, as though I needed any ideas for scary themes, the last two weeks brought three cases of potential exposures to rabies, all requiring investigations, quarantines and one submission for testing.

Although April is “Rabies Awareness Month”, rabies is a viral disease of mammals existing all year round and, being the deadly disease that it is, is worth knowing about and being aware of all year long.

First, the rat. The initial report indicated that a pet rat (yes, some people have rats as pets) had a “bite/wound of unknown origin”. Whenever a pet has that, the vet knows to report it and to consider the possibility that a rabid animal might have caused this wound. This happens typically to cats and dogs allowed to go outside. If the pet comes in with that wound of unknown origin, it might have been attacked by something like a rabid raccoon. The vet checks for the rabies vaccination history, gives the pet a “booster” shot, even if it is up to date and, as a precaution, the cat or dog is quarantined for 10 days or up to six months, depending on exposure and vaccination history.

There is enough research for certain animals that the quarantine period is known. Just as we are learning about that 21 day window with Ebola, there are known quarantine periods for some animals when it comes to the time frames for the incubation period, which is also affected by the vaccination history.

With rabies and different animals and different circumstances, it gets complicated though. For the rat, the poor little guy, there is no licensed rabies vaccine. Although rodents are rarely infected with rabies, it can happen. (There was once a Massachusetts case of an outdoor caged rabbit infected with rabies.) Since the rat wasn’t vaccinated and the exposure was unknown, the law requires the rat to be strictly quarantined for six months, or be euthanized and submitted for testing.

The owner chose to quarantine its dear pet rat. A pet is loved and the love is usually unconditional and, so, of course, the owner agreed to quarantine, as evidenced by our new Animal Inspector, Lisa.

The interesting twist on the rat: it was a recent acquisition, picked up in local department store parking lot. I momentarily freaked out when I heard that from Lisa. Was this person picking up and bringing home a wild rat? Lisa calmed my fears with the description of a white rat appearing to be domesticated. Still, where did it come from? Were people now dropping off rats the way some drop off cats at the roadside? Was the rat neutered? We certainly don’t need any addition to the wild rat population!

After the rat investigation, the call came in regarding a bat, still alive, a little bit chewed up, and two cats that might have done the chewing. The cats might have been exposed, and the wounded bat was available for capture, so, the bat gave up its life for science and to possibly save human lives! It only takes a couple days to receive the results from our State lab. Their efficiency and efficacy saves lives every year. The bat was rabid, indeed.

The cats would be quarantined for six months and the people...well, they had to think about their potential exposure on that day when they noticed the oddly acting bat. Did they pat and/or comfort their cats at that point? If so, that could have exposed them to saliva from the bat and, in turn, it would be, oh, so easy to absent mindedly wipe your eyes and transfer bat saliva from cat to human.

I advised the cat owners to speak to the DPH epidemiology department and their primary care physician. I stressed, however, that the trust was to go to the experts, in this case, the epidemiologists, rather than the physician who might say, "Oh, you probably didn't have contact with the bat saliva."

When it comes to rabies, better safe than sorry is the golden rule, for we can prevent rabies in humans with a series of preventative shots. If we discard the notion of exposure and acquire rabies, it is too late. If we get rabies, we die.

That is more than Halloween scary. It might be the basis of the next big television hit series: Rabid Humans, the Spread of the Threat.

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