

11-14-14 Relinquishing and Reclaiming Responsibility

Last week we talked about variations and complications in animal incidents, with the potential of the deadly rabies virus lurking over every single one involving exposure. The path of exposure varies, as it is not always a scratch or bite. Sometimes the exposure was from a hissing raccoon sending saliva into someone's eye or the pet owner who comforted his dog after a scuffle with another animal and then unwittingly caused his own exposure by rubbing his eyes with the invisible virus. One time, a man did the right thing by keeping a bat and calling the Board of Health to report it. His curiosity got the best of him, though, and he peeked into the box to see if it was dead. What kind of box would you use for a hopefully dead bat and where would you keep the box? Well, this man put it in a Cheerios box and kept it in his refrigerator. When he opened the box to take that confirmatory peek, the bat jumped out and bit him! He whacked it with a broom, killing it that time. The bat was submitted and tested by the Department of Public Health (DPH) and found to be rabid. The man's life was saved by the series of prophylactic vaccine and immune globulin. That incident was handled by the Board of Health, the too-curious human and DPH. It is the cases involving pets that can be very complicated. Those cases involve many of your town officials, all of whom are saving lives.

Preventing a death from rabies does not necessarily spare a person from trauma. Whenever there is a dog bite, concurrent to the health issues being addressed, the Board of Selectmen are notified so that they can determine, with the assistance of the Animal Control Officer and Animal Inspector, whether or not the dog is dangerous and what to do about that.

Such a case happened recently. A dog severely bit a visiting girl. That girl suffered an emotional trauma in addition to her leg requiring serious surgery. How will she feel about her scarred leg? How will she feel about dogs? I can only hope that receives loving counsel to help her to heal.

Then, of course, there are the owners of the dog. They are traumatized, also. They feel terrible that their pet attacked a child. Whatever the circumstances, that dog needs to be quarantined for ten days. Some people feel comfortable confining their dog, even though it bit, and after speaking with the Animal Inspector about the responsibility of the quarantine, including the dog being on a leash at all times when out of the kennel or crate.

Some people suddenly decide they don't want to quarantine their dog because they have just realized it might not be safe to do so, since it just chewed off a girl's calf. On the other hand, they don't want the dog euthanized and they don't want to officially relinquish ownership, either. That is just Relinquishing Responsibility. We don't always have all the options we wish for.

It can be really challenging to find a safe place for quarantine a dangerous dog. Some kennels won't take pit bulls. A stay at a veterinarian's could be more expensive than what many family can afford. These are some of the potential expenses of pet ownership and not always considered when taking home that cute puppy.

A recent case of a biting dog was headed toward a “dangerous dog hearing” with the Board of Selectmen. The family was further traumatized, understandably, by the thoughts of publicly discussing the complicated story with the gory details of the bite and the dangerous behavior witnessed while the dog had been in quarantine.

After a lengthy conversation, the family chose to do the responsible thing; compassionately euthanize the dog as soon as the ten day quarantine was complete. I was, once again, convinced that listening with sincere empathy results in unplanned positive results. The owners of the dog realized that this pet, if allowed to live, was headed for a miserable future of being feared and bouncing from one person to another, most likely biting again. Responsibility was reestablished and the right thing was done.

The dog’s past, it came to light, was also troubled. The New York shelter mislead the family about its past, indicating no other adoption and, yet, it was seen on Pet Finder website, on and then off. The shelter transported the young dog into Massachusetts without contacting or registering with our Department of Agriculture’s rabies prevention department, as required. The shelter gave the dog to this family with only one meeting at a park. A good shelter requires numerous visits at their facility and they will also insist upon seeing the home of the adopting family.

Be wary of shelters with strict “no kill” policies. That might sound nice to animal lovers but it also means that some dogs are being placed again and again and biting again and again. While it is true that some dogs can be retrained, that takes expertise, patience, knowledge and time; all precious commodities. There aren’t many Dog Whisperers out there.

Our State Department of Agriculture will be contacting the New York shelter. I am thankful for that. And it probably won’t involve compassionate listening.

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