

Family Medicine

Mad dog loose! Mad dog loose! It's been many years since communities in North Carolina--indeed the nation--froze in fear upon hearing that plaintive cry. And, while chances of being bitten by a rabid animal is perhaps not as great now as it once was, the disease is just as agonizingly deadly as it ever was.

Effective vaccine has nearly eliminated rabies in domestic animals, according to Dr. John Freeman, head of the Veterinary Public Health Branch of the State Health Department. But, it appears, it is a caldron that threatens to boil again.

Since 1965, an epidemic of rabies in Florida among raccoons has spread west to Mississippi and north to about 14 miles from the North Carolina-South Carolina border. Hundreds of raccoons have been examined and found to be rabid in the area and, Dr. Freeman points out, infection of dogs and cats has picked up correspondingly.

"I am confident that we are going to have an epidemic of rabies in North Carolina," Dr. Freeman affirmed. "There is a certain interface between dogs, cats, and wild animals and, if they are not protected, rabies will spread to domestic pets. We have time to get our house in order but we must start now. It's frightening to look at the amount of contact between man and his pets and consider the possibility of their exposure to rabid wildlife. There is nothing we can do to stop rabies in raccoons, but we can immunize the dog and cat population," Freeman asserted. The public health specialist said there are some two million dogs and cats in North Carolina and only about half have been vaccinated against rabies. State law requires that all dogs over four months old be immunized. Three counties and one city have also passed ordinances requiring that cats be immunized against rabies.

"People are not motivated to act nowadays," Dr. Freeman said, "because there is little consequence for not complying with the law in many localities. Generally speaking, local attitudes towards enforcement is lax and, as a result, people have become lax. Another factor contributing to lax attitudes is the lack of fear of the disease--there has not been a case of canine rabies in North Carolina since 1969. The last human death was in 1956--the result of a dog bite. If enforcement was the same for rabies vaccination as it is for license plates, we would have acceptable compliance."

What is this sinister virus that scrambles brain circuits and turns human beings into frothing, transfixed bundles of rage waiting impatiently for merciful death? Dr. Freeman explained that the rabies virus attacks brain cells and produces destructive changes in the central nervous system. Muscles that control swallowing become spastic to the extent that the patient's insatiable thirst cannot be quenched. Thus its name--hydrophobia. Light and sound are intolerable. It is a cruel, almost certain death--a dreaded disease.

Dr. Freeman recommends that all meat-eating animals (carnivores) and bats who bite someone be captured and a specimen sent to the State Laboratory for examination. He warned that dogs and cats should also be examined if they have not been immunized or are unknown to the victim. Otherwise, a domestic animal that bites should be observed for 10 days. He said animals classified as rodents do not transmit rabies and should not be examined.

Dr. Freeman urged those who want to send a specimen to the State Laboratory for examination for rabies to contact their county health department or county animal control officer for assistance. "There is some risk in handling specimens," he cautioned, "and those people know how." He noted that it is against postal regulations to send specimens through the mail.

Nearly all counties in the state will hold rabies clinics during the next month or so at a reduced rate. Residents of those counties that do not have animal control programs should have their pets immunized at the office of a veterinarian.

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