

RABIES IN THE NORTHWEST U.S. AND CANADA

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Rabies is a problem in western US as well as most of the country. The disease has become established in skunks, foxes, raccoons and bats, and is sporadic in all kinds of other mammals. Companion animals, i.e., dogs and cats are successfully protected by immunization — new vaccines can give protection for life, although it is recommended that the vaccine be given annually in areas where rabies is enzootic. There have been few human deaths due to rabies in the past decade due to the improved human treatment and preventive vaccination of persons at risk, i.e. veterinarians and their assistants, wildlife wardens and scientists.

The introduction of rabies into the northwest was thought to have been by the explorers and pioneers who came to open up the great land. The disease was routinely reported after the country was settled but further investigation has raised some questions. It is historically recorded that David Mackenzie sent word to Lewis and Clark when they reached headwaters of the Missouri about the danger of animal and snake bites, with advice on how to treat such injuries. Mackenzie related how the wolf and dog bite wounds could be fatal by injury or slow agonizing paralysis. These observations support the concept that rabies was present in the NW before the pioneers came to settle the land, and possibly before the first English or American explorers came to the country. It may be that French or Spanish explorers may have visited the NW country earlier. The Russians laid claim to much of this country after Bering, the Danish explorer crossed Siberia and visited Alaska and the NW coast. Bering was empowered by Catherine the Great to explore Asia and North America in the late 1700's about the time Mackenzie made his first trek across Canada.

The Eskimo Indians have words in their language describing the sickness that follows dog or wolf bite. But when these events first occurred is difficult to determine. Rabies was known to exist in Europe before it was described in the Americas. The earliest medical descriptions are by Greek physicians of the fourth century B.C. 400. From then to the present, the disease and treatment are described — see *History of Rabies*, James H. Steele; *Rabies*, Edited by Baer, Academic Press, 1974.

The investigations of 1982 led me to interviews with scientists and librarians in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Utah to obtain data on the recognition of rabies in that area.

Also to the Lewis and Clark Society and their historical records. These have been most valuable. We are now examining David Mackenzie's journals at Rice University, Houston, Texas to look for leads that can be tracked down in the

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Further correspondence has been initiated with scientists in Copenhagen to search Bering's journals for any word on bite wound disease or rabies. In collaboration with Robert Rausch, a famous Arctic scientist, the Alaskan and Siberian Eskimo Indian folklore is being searched for leads on the first recognition of rabies. These data are to be presented to the History of Medicine Society at a forth coming meeting and publication.

In 1983 and 1984, search will continue for further information. To assist naturalists and national park scientists and administration, a pamphlet has been prepared describing the occurrence of rabies in the NW and what control measures can be implemented, along with recommendations on the prophylaxis and treatment of human rabies.