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# Rabies in Iowa

by Bernie Napolski\*

Iowa has one of the highest rates of rabies outbreaks in the country and there is very little the state legislature can do about it. To deal with rabies effectively, the state would have to get to the source of the major portion of rabies cases in Iowa—the skunk.

“The skunk population is the major contributor to the state’s rabies problems, and throughout the midwest,” George Beran, a professor of Preventive Medicine at Iowa State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine said. Beran said that he and other experts in the field have identified the skunk as the major problem, but don’t know exactly why the skunk is such a good transmitter of rabies.

“We don’t know exactly how skunks pass the disease so easily, but it probably has to do with the way they live, in dens,” he said. “There is evidence they hold it very well and that there is some mechanism that allows them to pass it to one another easily.” Beran said aerosol transmission and transmission by way of a lactating skunk to her young are two possible means of transmitting the disease among skunks.

“In order to control the rabies problem it would be necessary to kill 80 percent of the skunk population and that is almost impossible,” Beran said. “The best the state can do is try to educate the people about the hazards of rabies and emphasize the importance of having pets vaccinated for rabies.”

The number of cats and dogs that aren’t vaccinated each year is very high and Beran said that no figures would be accurate. “There are many cats around that no one knows exist and it is cats that are the principle cause of rabies in humans,” he said. Except for two deaths attributed to rabies in 1980, no other cases of human rabies have been reported in the state

since the early 1950’s. However, during 1981, 452 people were treated for rabies exposure. Thus, while rabies in humans is not at a dangerous level, it is a constant health hazard that can only be controlled through conscientious vaccination of pets and barn cats.

The death rate in farm animals is much higher than that in humans. “In 1981 there were 142 cattle deaths due to rabies,” Beran said. Where there is an obvious danger of cattle being infected with rabies, Beran recommends that they be vaccinated. He cautions, though, that where there have been deaths caused by rabies, vaccination might not stop other deaths.

“The vaccination can only keep uninfected animals from dying. If the animal has been infected and the virus is in incubation, it can’t be stopped,” he said.

Beran also recommends that valuable horses be vaccinated.

While 1981 was a record-breaking year for incidence of rabies, the outlook for the next few years is not as bad. Presently there are far fewer cases of rabies this year than last. “As of July this year we had fewer reported cases of rabies than we had in May of 1981,” Beran said. “This is characteristic of rabies though. It’s cyclic. We are on a downhill slope this year, but I would expect in a couple of years it will begin to rise again.”

Even though the number of rabies cases is on its way down this year, it will still cost the state a substantial amount of money. In 1981 rabies cost the state 2.3 million dollars, of which 1.9 million was spent on vaccinations, Beran said. The balance was spent on impounding and caring for suspect rabid animals.

Beran said that presently the best prevention for rabies is to have veterinarians and the state continue doing what they have been doing, encouraging people to have their pets vaccinated.

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