

VOLUME 6, NO. 2 Summer 1988

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Bats Falsely Blamed in Rabies Death

Although many news reports about bats now attempt to dispel myths and educate readers on their importance, still others perpetuate misinformation and reinforce the negative image many people hold. Typical of such reports are those in which bats are carelessly linked to rabies. A story that was reported countrywide late last year in newspapers and on national television did much to create unnecessary fear of bats. A 13-year-old San Francisco boy died of rabies in December of 1987, and though the source and circumstances of exposure were unknown, a health department doctor speculated that the boy likely had been bitten by a bat while on a camping trip. There was no evidence to suggest that the boy had ever been near a bat.

A tissue sample from the boy subsequently was tested at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, and the conclusion was that the boy did not contract rabies from a bat. It appears that this important correction was never reported by the media, or if it was, it never gained the widespread attention of the initial report. In the meantime, campers and the general public were needlessly frightened, and countless people undoubtedly decreased their tolerance for bats.

People should be warned not to handle bats, since sick ones are those most likely to be found, but they also must be educated that, if simply left alone, bats are harmless. As pointed out by Dr. Denny Constantine, a public health veterinarian for the State of California and a leading authority on rabies in bats, "The public health problems posed by bats are relatively insignificant compared to the public health problems usually initiated by those who publicize bats as problematic, typically resulting in an exaggerated, inappropriate public response, damaging to the public health."

It is a common misconception that most bats are rabid, but the truth is that the frequency of rabies in bats is less than half a percent, no higher than in many other animals. Some of the false reports can be attributed to the fact that most labs test only bats submitted because they are rabies-suspect; the results reported often imply that such bats are typical. An extreme example of such a testing bias inferred that 50% of a state's bats were rabid when one of two bats examined tested positive for rabies!

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