

## VOLUME 14, NO. 4 Winter 1996

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### Misleading News Stories Harm Bats

It is unfortunate that media columnists and their editors do not always think ahead to the consequences of speculative stories and their scary headlines. On October 21, 1996, an Associated Press headline read, "Fruit Bats Source of Fatal Virus," and a similar story, "Deadly Ebola virus seen to thrive in bats," ran in Science News on November 9. From these, thousands of media stories have circled the globe, flooding BCI with calls from needlessly frightened people.

The fruit bat story originated from two incidents involving infection of 23 horses and two humans with a virus called the equine morbillivirus (EMV) in Brisbane and Mackay, Queensland, Australia, in 1994. Sixteen of the horses and both people died--the humans apparently contracting the virus from their horses. There is no evidence that any of the horses or humans had been in contact with fruit bats.

The connection to fruit bats was made when antibodies to EMV and a bat paramyxovirus were both identified in flying foxes, and preliminary studies suggested that these were the same virus. In fact, the captive flying foxes from which the antibodies were identified had been in close contact with humans for years without problem. Further, none of the many hundreds of Queenslanders who have cared for orphaned and injured flying foxes for the past fifteen years have ever been harmed. As Dr. Len Martin of the Department of Physiology & Pharmacology at The University of Queensland points out, ". . . there is no evidence of the transmission of serious disease from flying foxes to humans. . . . the epidemiological data, based on many thousands of human-bat contact hours, shows that if there has been a morbilli-like virus circulating within the flying fox populations, it has posed little or no risk to humans."

More recently, an Australian animal rehabilitator that was bitten by a sick insectivorous bat died of rabies. The bat had not been examined, and she had not been vaccinated, because rabies was not previously known from Australia. Leading experts suspect that the disease has been in Australian bats all along, but that, as in North America, transmission from bats to humans is so rare that it took many years to be discovered. This case illustrates that even Australians should not handle bats without pre-exposure vaccination.

Scientists did demonstrate that Ebola virus injected into bats in a laboratory could live in the bats without harming them, and this is of substantial scientific interest. Nevertheless, to claim bats as the source of Ebola outbreaks is highly speculative. This is especially true considering that this rare African virus has not been found in any wild bats, including those living in areas where human outbreaks have occurred.

In their search for stories that sell, too many columnists and editors have failed to put these findings in perspective. The average human is hundreds of times more likely to die from a dog attack, bee sting, or bicycle accident. Of the roughly 30,000 humans worldwide who die of rabies each year, 99 percent contract it from dogs. As a BCI member, you can help whenever you see misleading information by letting reporters and their publishers know the consequences of their actions and that you care.

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