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CATS, HUMANS, AND A MYSTERIOUS DISEASE: CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Before beginning, I need to make it perfectly clear that this article is NOT about Ted Nugent's famous/infamous rock and roll classic that our parents in the late 1970s forbade us all from listening to. Regrettably, this is something more serious. The idea for an article on cat scratch fever was actually a request. Because she suspected the disease in herself, a friend and good client asked me to write about it in one of my famous/infamous articles.

Cat scratch fever was one of thousands of diseases in both animals and humans that I'd learned about in vet school. Back in those dark ages of the late 1980's, the causative agent of 'sub-acute regional lymphadenitis' (the medical term for cat scratch fever) had just been discovered! We basically learned, that with the exception of immune-compromised people (patients on chemotherapy or people who have AIDS), the disease was--and still is (somewhat)--a self-limiting one. That is, a disease that usually goes away without treatment. In the years since then, however, after attending many medical conferences and doing some extensive research, things have changed hugely! One of the more curious and potentially valuable piece of information I found in my studies was a possible co-infection link to Lyme disease.

Before I begin, I need to do just a bit of science (I promise, just a little bit.) Every known living creature on the planet has two Latin (sometimes Greek) names: A genus (which is sort of a broad "family" name) and a species (which describes an individual in a "family." Humans are Homo sapiens; a red oak tree is Quercus rubra; Brassica rapa is a turnip; and the common dog tapeworm is Dipylidium caninum. The reason science uses such specific terms is not because we are elitist trying to impress non-science people, but rather to avoid confusion. A doctor in Bangladesh, China, or Iceland will know exactly what each other is talking about. And so the bacteria that causes cat scratch fever is called Bartonella henselae.

How the bacteria got its name is quite an interesting story. In 1905, an illness characterized by high fever, anemia (low blood cell count), and quick death broke out among railroad workers building a railway between Lima and La Oroya, a mining town in the Andes. A Peruvian scientist named Alberto Leonardo Barton determined that the outbreak was something known as Carrion disease. As a result of his studies, he was able to identify a previously unknown bacteria that whose genus ("family" name) ultimately went on to be called Bartonella. Since then, scientist have so far, by my last count, identified 14 species of this bacteria. It wasn't until around 1985 that a microbiologist named Diane Hensel, while working with AIDS patients at an Oklahoma Hospital, identified and isolated the specific agent responsible for causing cat scratch fever. In her honor, science named the new species of Bartonella after her.

First, I'll talk about cat scratch fever disease in cats. This is the easy part. Most of the time, and even though they may be infected, cats don't suffer much from the disease. A very observant owner may notice a decrease in appetite or the cat acting reluctant to move for a few days. A veterinarian exam may demonstrate a mild fever or enlarged lymph nodes . . . which are symptoms of about a million other different diseases. Cats catch the disease through direct contact with fleas and with flea feces while grooming themselves; or, through fighting with other cats. Estimates of affected cats range from 40 - 60%. New evidence--which will be important for humans to know as well--strongly supports transmission of the disease as well by ticks!

Secondly, cat scratch fever in humans. Until recently, humans were thought to catch cat scratch fever only from an infected cat that either scratched them or whose saliva touched an open wound. Although the medical literature is still completely undecided, there is a possibility that ticks may be involved as well. It is estimated that there are up to 24,000 cases a year in the U.S. that require some degree of hospitalization. Although anyone of any age can catch cat scratch fever, people less than 21 years old are the most likely to become infected. As a general rule, symptoms of the disease appear 3 - 14 days after a scratch, bite, or lick. And because they express the symptoms so clearly, the following is shamelessly quoted from the Centers for Disease Control website: "About three to 14 days after the skin is broken, a mild infection can occur at the site of the scratch or bite. The infected area may appear swollen and red with round, raised lesions and can have pus. The infection can feel warm or painful. A person with CSD may also have a fever, headache, poor appetite, and exhaustion. Later, the person's lymph nodes closest to the original scratch or bite can become swollen, tender, or painful."

And I am way, WAY out of room. Much more next time.

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The South Seneca Board of Education will hold a public comment period at their regular meeting on Wednesday April 25, 2018 @ 7:00pm in Room 112 at the Ovid Middle High School for presentation and discussion of the Smart Bond Investment Plan and allow an opportunity for the public to comment on how the monies will be utilized at the District.

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