

Cottage country rattled by spate of snake bites

Doctors warn of shortage of medicine

BY ODILE NELSON

Six rattlesnake attacks in cottage country over the past two weeks have led health officials to warn someone could die if adequate antivenin supplies are not distributed.

In a typical year only two or three snake bites are reported in the Georgian Bay area, which has the highest concentration of Massasauga rattlers in Ontario. No clear answer for this year's increase in bites has been given, but experts point to the unusually hot, dry weather.

At the same time, fears are rising about treatment because of a retrenchment by the Ministry of Health.

The ministry used to run a provincial antivenin depot from which it distributed a Canadian-made medicine to area hospitals on a case-by-case basis. But last summer Wyeth-Ayerst Canada stopped producing the medicine, so the ministry began buying a more expensive brand from the United States.

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Hospitals must purchase own antivenin from U.S.

ANTIVENIN

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Shortly thereafter, the ministry disbanded its distribution system and passed on the purchase of the U.S. product to individual hospitals.

"I don't think they [government officials] understand the urgency of the situation. Yes, snake bites are rare but we've already had six this year. ... It's only when somebody dies that something will be done," Dr. Ola Kassim, director of laboratory services and pathology at the West Parry Sound Health Centre, said yesterday.

The new antivenin, CroFab, costs US\$1,800 for two vials; the typical treatment requires 10 vials.

Dr. Kassim said some hospitals have refused to purchase CroFab and have instead chosen to rely on the supplies of neighbouring hospitals. But this, he said, creates a potentially dangerous situation when one area is hit by a rash of incidents and those limited supplies are eliminated.

"You have to plan for worst-case scenario. There has to be in the system enough antivenin so if one hospital has an unusual amount of cases, we all send our antivenin to help out," he said.

Although the Massasauga rattler injects venom into its victims only 60% of the time, when it does, the effect can be fatal if not immediately treated. The venom thins a victim's blood, preventing the blood from clotting and causing a patient to bleed to death internally.

Dr. Kassim said without a central organization monitoring the distribution of the antidote, hospitals lacking supplies do not know who to contact in an emergency.

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to contact in an emergency.

Janice Hardy, spokeswoman for the South Muskoka Municipal Hospital, said the new system has made it difficult for hospitals like her own, which has had only three life-threatening snake bite cases in 15 years, to justify purchasing an expensive drug that may not be used before its expiry date.

Although her hospital hopes to eventually purchase its own antivenin supply, its efforts are also frustrated because its American manufacturer is unable to meet the demand. The South Muskoka Hospital will likely acquire the antivenin this October.

"In the meantime, we would have no choice but to ask other hospitals to send us some of their own limited supply or we would have to send our patient there," Ms. Hardy said.

Georgian Bay biologists say area residents have little to worry about if they educate themselves about the Massasauga rattler.

Ron Black, a wildlife biologist with the Parry Sound office of the Ministry of Natural Resources, said the snake is typically shy and does its best to avoid predators.

The snake is two to three feet long with a grey body, a black belly and dark reddish-brown blotches on its back. It usually rattles a warning if people get too close and attacks only when it feels threatened.