

HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

Another rattler bite in Midland area

BY SHARON WEATHERALL
FREE PRESS SPECIAL

Three people have now been admitted to Huronia District Hospital (HDH) for Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake bites in the past four weeks - two have been administered with anti-venom to treat the effect of the poison on their body and one was not.

The latest victim, an adult who arrived at the hospital early Monday August 12, did not receive the serum. After monitoring the patient closely for 14 hours, attending physicians determined that while indeed serious, the bite was 'dry' causing no dangerous side effects to the person.

This was confirmed by measuring the swelling of the bitten limb and monitoring for pain and side effects from the bite.

A dry bite means there is no venom in the fangs of the snake.

The snake does not use venom for defense, but to kill their prey (usually a mouse) and start the digestive process.

According to local snake expert Jim Johnstone, if the snake injects venom, which is a modified version of saliva, it is only a very small amount - "enough to kill a mouse".

Johnstone told the *Free Press* in a recent interview that twenty-five percent of snake bites are dry-bites.

However anyone who has been bitten by a snake should seek medical care immediately.

A physician will decide if they need treatment or not.

HDH treats on average between 1-3 bites per season.

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HDH busy with bites

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It is ranked second for treating Massasauga Rattlesnake bites in this area, which is the natural habitat of the endangered species. So far this year HDH has used 13 vials of Crofab anti-venom and currently have 11 vials in supply. The number one treatment centre for bites is Parry Sound General Hospital, a facility which treats on average between 4 - 8 bites per season. A total of 6 victims have already been treated this season in Parry Sound.

While the total number of snake bites in the area is not yet over average, it has put a strain on the amount of anti-venom available. The costly anti-venom serum which used to be made in Canada and provided cost free through the provincial government, now comes from Wales at a cost of \$1,000 US and close to \$1,800 Canadian. Both HDH and Parry Sound have had to order extra supplies of the product, as Parry Sound came dangerously close to a crisis last week, when they were waiting on supplies and had another snake bite victim come in.

"This year so far we have used 30 vials of Crofab, totaling close to \$60,000. Currently we have 36 vials on hand and it has a shelf life of about 18 months," said Beverly Hall director of critical care for Parry Sound General Hospital.

"The last bite we had was on August 1st and there has

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been nothing since. We are still below average for the season. We experienced three bites in one weekend and that happened before two years ago. Again this is due to the high volume of people in the area for a holiday weekend."

With a recent change of suppliers, came the news that Crofab - a new product, is no longer covered by the ministry, so costs fell back onto individual user hospitals. This presented a major budget increase for HDH in Midland and Parry Sound General Hospital, both considered key locations for snake anti-venom for the Georgian Bay area.

"This is certainly a major cost factor and huge factor in our budget. We would have to budget about \$90,000 per year," said Hall.

"We have contacted the ministry to ask for assistance and have requested that Parry Sound be designated as a depot for distributing the anti-venom. We could do research on snake bites, perfect the protocol and gather data. We would be able to supply other hospitals. All of the other user hospitals have endorsed the idea that Parry Sound become a depot and the verbal response from the ministry has been positive."

Simcoe North MPP Garfield Dunlop explained that up until 2001 anti-venom was produced in Canada by Wyeth-Ayerst and was covered under the Canada Health Act, therefore the cost was covered by the ministry. When that ceased, the new product (Crofab) has been imported by the hospitals under the Health Canada Special Access Program and comes into Canada unlicensed.

"Because the anti-venom is unlicensed, it is not funded. Policy stipulates it is illegal to

distribute in this country," said Dunlop.

"Up to this year there was not a big demand, but snake bites now appear to be up. Alberta, Saskatchewan and BC are currently in the same bind. The new product is a lot more expensive."

Dunlop says he will work towards getting approval through Health Canada so that some funding assistance can be obtained for the hospitals. There are 13 anti-venom depots in the province and all of them circulate around Georgian Bay from Tobermory to Parry Sound. Dunlop said that Muskoka area people use HDH, as it is closer for them than Parry Sound and there are a lot of Massasauga rattlers in that region. He said the key is make sure that hospitals have a supply of anti-venom on hand and if they are having difficulty budgeting for it, funding assistance should be made available. He said it is a unique situation that we live in a habitat of poisonous snakes, snakes that also happen to be endangered.

"In the short term it is important right now to get over this temporary crisis by making sure the product is available at the hospitals for victims and not caught up in customs," said Dunlop.

"We have to find a way to work together with the partners so the hospitals can be compensated and resolve this as soon as possible."

In the short term the best 'medicine' is prevention. Those who live or vacation in the known habitat of a poisonous snake such as the Massasauga Rattler, should protect themselves, when walking in the woods by wearing protective clothing and footwear. HDH began an education program on snake bite prevention several weeks ago.

"People should not take it for granted they cannot get bit in cottage country," said Dunlop.

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