

Catching rabies from bats: a small risk but a real one

It is noteworthy, comment three public health experts in the *BMJ* for 5 March, that until 2002 the UK was free from rabies while throughout the rest of the world some 70,000 deaths from the disease, half of them in children, occur each year. Hundreds of cases of the infection have been detected in bats in continental Europe, mainly in Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France and Spain. Most have been attributed to European bat lyssavirus type 1 (EVLB-1), which is predominantly associated with the serotine bat, but another type, EVLB-2, occurs in Daubenton's bat and the European pond bat.

In the UK no EVLB-1 virus has been discovered over the past 18 years or so, but four cases of EVLB-2 have been isolated from Daubenton's bats in Surrey, Sussex and Lancashire. Antibodies to EVLB-2, though not the virus itself, have been reported in 6 to 15 per cent of Daubenton's bats. Close co-

operation is required between clinicians, laboratory experts and human and animal health experts when anyone has been scratched or bitten by a bat, or whose eyes, mucosae or broken skin have been in contact with bat saliva.

Only licensed bat handlers routinely come into contact with the creatures, and they are advised to be vaccinated before exposure and should wear bite-proof gloves when handling bats.

The UK's commonest species, pipistrelles and brown long-eared bats, have hitherto been found not to harbour European bat lyssaviruses, so that the chance of inadvertent contact with an infected bat is small.

Behavioural abnormalities such as flight during daylight or appearing grounded or paralysed may cast suspicion on a bat. Members of the public should never pick up an obviously sick or injured bat but should leave it to an expert to handle.

And I quote . . .

Doomed to be human

"Alone among the animals, [man] is dowered with the capacity to invent imaginary worlds, and he is always making himself unhappy by trying to move into them. Thus he underrates the world in which he actually lives and so misses most of the fun that is in it. That world, I am convinced, could be materially improved, but even as it stands it is good enough to keep any reasonable man entertained for a lifetime. As for me, I roll out of my couch every morning with the most agreeable expectations. In the morning paper there is always massive and exhilarating evidence that the human race, despite its ages-long effort to imitate the seraphim, is still doomed to be irrevocably human, and in my morning mail I always get soothing proof that there are men left who are even worse asses than I am." — Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956), American author and critic, in 'Living philosophies' (1931).

Two hundredth anniversary of the strange master of the fairy-tale

Two centuries ago, on 2 April 1805, Hans Christian Andersen was born in Odense, a city of some 5,000 in Denmark. His father, also Hans, was a cobbler with a vigorous imagination, his mother Ann Marie, with a passion for household tidiness but highly superstitious, was a washerwoman. Perhaps it is no wonder that young Hans showed from an early age a rather fantastic mental set towards the world. Moreover, there was family history of eccentricity, the tale-teller's paternal grandfather Anders Hansen being considered insane, since he wandered through the locality selling strange wooden figures he had carved.

Anne Marie's husband was determined to offer his son a wider education than he or his wife had enjoyed. When only a boy, Hans the younger leaned a little about anatomy and drew diagrams on a door used as a blackboard for the enlightenment of aged pensioners in a local retirement home. Unfortunately part of the hospice was occupied by insane folks, who, not surprisingly, scared the lad who was trying to entertain them.

Hans had to contend with other stressful circumstances. When only six years old he was greatly upset by rumours of a comet that threatened the earth. A tyrannous school headmaster once caned Hans so severely that he walked out. At his next school, the pupils knew that his father was eccentric and his grandfather mad, and regarded his conduct with suspicion. He was traumatised by another headmaster, Meisling.



To relieve his tension, Hans played with a model theatre for which he designed costumes. When his father died Hans was sent to work in a clothing factory but showed a marked taste for poetry, and published a book of poems in 1832 and a second volume a year later. Later he worked in a factory producing snuff, which damaged his lungs.

Meanwhile Hans became a great admirer of Walter Scott, and in Copenhagen developed a close friendship with Oersted the

physicist, whose names were also Hans Christian. From 1833 Andersen made many travels in France, Germany and Italy, undertaking a pilgrimage to Salzburg to visit the former home of Paracelsus, for whom he expressed great admiration.

He had a remarkably wide range of friends and acquaintances, including members of noble European families and literary and scientific figures. One of his favourite correspondents was the young daughter of Dr David Livingstone.

During travels in 1873 he suffered a feverish attack and fainting spells. There is some evidence that he had cancer of the liver. In 1874 he suffered severe bronchitis and was treated with morphine, which, he wrote, gave him splendid dreams. He grew increasingly somnolent but continued to read a good deal. On August 4, 1875, he died peacefully in his sleep.

Hans Andersen was highly popular among the children to whom he read his fairy tales. A Dresden phrenologist, Carl Gustav Carus, once studied Hans's head and pronounced that his love of children, good nature, idealism, sense of wonder, affection for others, creative power and wit were marked, while his covetousness and sexuality were insignificant. Later studies have suggested that he may have had homosexual tendencies, but the evidence is not strong. By and large he rests as a remarkable and lovable storyteller towering over a stressful background which was not of his making.