

Disturbing KZN spitting cobra statistics

An alarming report this August came from Dr Mark Wagener, who is on the staff of Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital. He has treated 164 cases of snake-bite over the last four months, most of the victims being children living in the deep rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Children are especially vulnerable in these areas, as many of them sleep on the floor at night.

Most of the bites (93%) have been from the Mozambique spitting cobra, the *mfezi*, Dr Wagener said. He began a study of snake-bite cases when he was an intern at Empangeni's Ngwelezana Hospital and found a high intake of child snake-bite patients.

A photograph accompanying an article in *The Independent on Saturday* shows the alarming damage done to a young child's arm from shoulder to fingers. Bites cause severe and extensive tissue destruction. Hospital treatment requires the expertise of a team of highly trained medical people. The destroyed tissue has to be removed, skin grafts are often necessary, and occupational therapy is needed to get fingers, hands, arms, legs or toes mobile again.

There are relatively few snake-bites in city areas like Durban, despite there being a snake population that is largely unseen owing to population density which keeps snakes cautious about showing themselves. Most bites occur in the northern coastal regions of KZN and in parts of Zululand like the Ulundi and Empangeni areas.

More than half the victims have been under ten years of age, and fifteen per cent were between ten and fifteen. A three-year-old girl was bitten three times on the face, and the victims include a three-month-old baby.

Untreated spitting cobra bites can cause lack of limb function, which is likely to lead to victims being limited in job performance later and therefore has serious socio-economic consequences.

The question always is: what can be done? First of all, beds are essential, even if they have to be shared, and children need to be wrapped in a blanket in winter or a sheet during the hot summer months.

The cost of beds is beyond the means of many rural people. Yet what is essential to protect from snakes is a simple structure adequately raised from the floor. There is an inexpensive technology that could be taught. It would initially need organisational support but, after only a brief training through workshops, people are able to train others. I am thinking of the Appropriate Paper Technology workshops given years ago by Fransie and Laura Pretorius, including for Embambiswaneni, a project for black teachers of English in KZN that I ran for seventeen years as a voluntary service from 1977, which is how I came to see the workshops in action. Laura Pretorius has been the education officer for our Durban & Coast SPCA Humane Education since its inception eleven years ago.

These paper technology workshops taught people to make useful, attractive and surprisingly strong items from *papier mache*. The materials were simple in the extreme: scrap paper collected from a variety of sources, adhesive made from flour and water, old magazines to provide designs in colour for the final layer, and varnish to seal.

The workshops taught the entire process from design and calculation of dimensions to the finished product, which would look amazingly professional. The final layer would be painted in a bright design or would use illustrations from magazines and would then be varnished to give a shiny wipe-able finish.

In a single day-workshop, people made bowls, stools, small tables and other items that were surprisingly strong. As skill develops with a little further training, it is possible to make larger items like beds or cupboards and even equipment like crutches or walkers.

The heartbreak of losing a canine partner

A few years ago, Metro Police Inspector Jacques Fourie started a fund-raising drive to help pay for treatment for his dog, Kongo, who had been diagnosed with a heart disease. Kongo died in 2013, and his death affected Jacques so much that he felt unable to take on another dog.

His partner Lee Bryant sometimes took out a Rottweiler, one of two donated dogs at a kennels in Isipingo. One day, when they went to fetch the Rottweiler, they were told that the other dog had broken out.

Jacques was bending down to tie his shoelace when the dog bounded towards him, pushed him over and licked his face. This was Fancy, a Sable Shepherd. She was in poor shape, and Jacques felt that he wanted to look after her. Lee had a garden cottage, so there was accommodation for Fancy.

In 2012, when Jacques had begun to work in the public relations division, Lee contacted him to say that Fancy had run away. Jacques was devastated, but Fancy was rescued by a woman who contacted a vet. Jacques found Fancy sitting on his rescuer's couch, looking quite at home. He took her home with him and began working with her through the public relations department.

As he got to know her, he felt that she was better suited to outreach rather than police patrol. They visited hospitals, old age homes, special schools and the AIDS Centre and became increasingly close. She brought her love and her joyousness to people wherever she went, even though her own early life had been without loving care.

Two weeks before her death, she was leaping around and seemingly enjoying life. Then Jacques noticed that she was vomiting. An operation followed, and he was told that she would need chemotherapy. On 22 July, three days after she began chemo, she died, leaving Jacques devastated.

Because he had seen what a difference Fancy had made to the people they visited, he feels able to "go through it all again" and this time might take on a puppy and try to bring it up to be like Fancy: "I will miss her always, but hope to build on her legacy."

The *Berea Mail's* tribute to the work done by Fancy and Jacques drew attention to something dear to our hearts: how communication with a dog can lift the spirits of the chronically ill of all ages and also to the elderly living in retirement complexes that do not allow individuals to have pets. When a retirement complex has taken on a couple of dogs, the difference the animals have made to animal-lovers who have been bereft of their pets has been incalculable. There are breeds that are particularly suited to this kind of living and happily adapt.

Canine signs of car sickness

Humans are able to communicate their distress when they are suffering from motion sickness, but a range of symptoms might indicate that your pet is feeling uncomfortable or even downright ill when travelling by car.

A medication for canine motion sickness is available from veterinarians, and the suppliers list a range of possible symptoms, apart from the obvious one of 'throwing up'. Here they are:

- * Does your dog appear to be really anxious when travelling by car?
- * Does he seem unusually tired during trips?
- * Does he easily lose its balance?
- * Does he drool excessively?
- * Does he slaver all over the back seat?

If your dog shows any of these symptoms, the suppliers suggest the following:

- * Don't feed your dog during the couple of hours before you set off.
- * Make sure he relieves himself before you leave.
- * Ensure that there is sufficient space for your dog to lie down on the back seat.
- * Open a window slightly so that he can take in air from the draught.
- * Drive as smoothly as possible, so that he does not slip around.
- * If you are on a long trip, stop every couple of hours to walk him around briefly.
- * Always start with short trips so that your dog is able to get used to car travel.

Dogs get to understand our words and tone

After scanning the brains of dogs who were listening to their trainer, a research team in Budapest, Hungary, has reported on its findings in the journal, *Science*. Their aim was to determine the part of the dogs' brains being used during the exercise. It was found that left- and right-hemisphere processing followed the same pattern as with most humans, with left-hemisphere dominance, but with tone being reflected in the right hemisphere.

Head researcher Altic Andics, a neuroscientist at Eotvos Lorand University at Budapest University, said that the team's findings suggest that the mental ability to process language evolved earlier than has been thought.

What has appeared to set humans apart was the invention of language, but the mental abilities involved in processing words that were thought to be uniquely human can now be seen to be shared with other species.

It has been assumed that human ability to create words must have involved a great 'jump' in neural capacity, but the experiments indicate that dogs have some capacity to understand words. Other species are likely to have this innate mental ability, although their non-human environment might not activate it. Dogs have lived with humans for thousands of years. Human speech has therefore been part of their long-term environment.

The researchers feel that human use of words probably arose out of invention rather than out of some special neural mechanism, since there is no evidence of a special mechanism in human brains to account for the creation of language.

Almost all dog-lovers are likely to feel that they knew this about their pets all along! But there are always those who regard accounts of animal abilities to be purely subjective unless there is objective 'proof'.