

Bubonic plague's legacy lives on

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Veterinarian Barbara Swanson didn't think much about it when the sweet, sick cat she was treating for an infection bit her on the thumb.

Four days later, a high fever and intense pain in her arm sent her to the hospital. The diagnosis: bubonic plague.

Esther Morrison believed her 70-year-old husband was exhausted when he stopped splitting wood, complained of stomach pain and told her not to count on him for supper.

Two days later, he was dead. The diagnosis: septicemic plague.

Despite its medieval aura — the Black Death (the pneumonic form of the plague) wiped out one-quarter of Europe's population in the 14th century — plague has a decidedly modern face. There are still sporadic outbreaks around the world. In the United States, an average of 10 to 15 cases are reported in humans each year, mostly in the West.

That makes it rare — but worrisome nonetheless.

Regional scares

"We treat it very seriously because of the risk of human-to-human spread and the high fatality rate," said Kenneth Gage, a chief of a plague section in the

federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Plague is a bacterial disease of rodents that generally is transmitted through flea bites. The culprits are most likely to be rock squirrels, ground squirrels, prairie dogs or pack rats living in the western half of the United States.

Most of the human cases occur in the Southwest and along the Sierra Nevada in California. There were human cases reported in at least 13 Western states.

And it doesn't require unsanitary conditions or urban squalor. A roaming cat can bring plague back to a suburban living room.

Although flea powder and other precautions can reduce the risk, plague kills about 16 percent of its human victims, according to the CDC.

Sneaky killer

There were 394 human plague cases in the nation from 1949 through 1997, 63 of them fatal, the CDC said.

New Mexico logged 218 of those, including 30 fatalities, said Paul Ettestad, public health veterinarian with the state Department of Health.

"It's a disease that can be fatal if not recognized and treated early enough," Ettestad said.

Swanson saw a doctor as soon as she felt sick and spent two days in the hospital. Several months later, she still had lingering fatigue.

Esther Morrison's husband, Donald, a retired metallurgical engineer, died in August 1984 after being stricken at their house on a wooded hillside a few miles from Santa Fe.

Dead ground squirrels found in the family's woodpile were later determined to have had plague. But the doctor he saw twice didn't recognize the disease.

Early warning, early action

Bubonic plague, which accounts for 80 percent of cases, is marked by swollen lymph glands, called buboes.

It's harder to diagnose septicemic plague, which circulates in the bloodstream, and pneumonic plague, which infects the lungs and can be transmitted through coughing.

The incidence of plague appears to be cyclical, linked to the milder winters typical of El Niño years that cause rodents to thrive, Ettestad said.

Cats are more susceptible to plague than dogs. Listlessness and not eating are clues that a cat is ill. "If you become sick and there's a sick cat in the house, go see your doctor," Swanson advised.

UNL reaches 'historic' agreement on remains

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meeting a floor below the American Indian conference, voted almost unanimously to support the agreement signed by Moeser.

"The atmosphere in the room upstairs is entirely different than it was this morning," Moeser told the senate.

Moeser went on to explain the agreement, which he called a "major breakthrough."

Senators passed a motion supporting the "action taken by Chancellor Moeser to resolve the unfortunate issue relating to the physical remains of Native Americans."

A few senate members voiced opposition to the motion, saying the decision to support Moeser was hasty.

Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky, an educational psychology professor, said she appreciated the gesture but wanted the motion tabled and discussed further.

Psychology Professor Don Jensen also said the senate should not be so quick to hand out support.

"We should not give rewards to administration on five minutes' notice," Jensen said.

But English Professor James Ford said the motion was "imminently reasonable."

He said supporting the motion

strengthened UNL's administration. Moeser said: "This is the beginning of the end of this painful period in the university's history."

"The remains will finally be given a respectful burial."

Pamina Yellow Bird, a Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act consultant and member of the Arikara tribe, said the resolution was a historic agreement.

"(I) hope other universities will look to them," Yellow Bird said.

"They are working very hard to cooperate."

Yet Yellow Bird said there are still many issues that remain unresolved.

Sixteen thousand to 20,000 missing ancestors remain, she said. An investigation to determine whether the university violated laws in the study and storage of the bones still has to be completed.

"This (agreement) does not mean we will look away," she said.

But Ralph Thomas, a Santee Sioux and Omaha Heritage member, said the university has taken its first step in resolving the issue, as well as reconciling with Great Plains tribes.

"There have been a lot of first steps alone," Thomas said.

"First by the people, then by the tribes and then by the university."

Staff writer Jessica Fargen contributed to this report.

Post-tenure deadline extended

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told faculty members to identify minimal standards.

"There is quite a difference between satisfactory and minimal," said Ford, who is the former Academic Senate president.

"People are just trying to be very clear. Somehow minimal sounds clearer than satisfactory."

The timetable also was at issue.

Latta said colleges were told different things about the timeline.

"I don't know what individual language the deans communicated to their departments," Latta said.

Some deans may have not informed faculty members until this fall, which causes a time crunch.

She said other deans told faculty members to have the criteria in by mid-September.

Other departments, such as Latta's, associate professor of Information Sciences, have known since last spring.

Latta said no decisions, just clarifications, were made Tuesday concerning the issue. She said Edwards seemed flexible and willing to work with deans and faculty members to get the process rolling.

Judge: Morals change legal issues

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been astounded how journalists have turned on him."

Lying to the American people was the first item on the articles of impeachment against Richard Nixon, Bork said.

"When the evidence comes out I think there may be a wave of disgust," he said.

Later Bork declined to comment on Clinton with students.

More than 100 students attended Bork's speech in a packed auditorium on East Campus.

"I don't agree with all of his opinions, but he is one of the most logical legal minds there is," law student Eric Sanford said.

Several of the problems Bork cited, such as the different ideologies taught in constitutional law classes, are evident at UNL's law school, Sanford said. Though some students did not agree with Bork's comments,

they all listened attentively as he enumerated what he viewed as the problems with the legal system and society. "The legal system has started to judge by ideology, not law," Bork said.

Judges are influenced by the opinions of society and how they are viewed by their peers and the media, he said.

Even law schools, where future judges are trained, have become politicized, Bork said.

"Culture is influencing the law," he said, "and decisions are not based on the Constitution."

The politicizing of court decisions is a problem worldwide, Bork said.

"Judges are the only ones who can make their ideologies stick with their court decisions," Bork said.

Legislators are the primary policy makers, not judges, he said.

Bork said court decisions based on the will of the majority instead of

constitutional law such as Roe vs. Wade and the separation of church and state have contributed to America's moral decline.

Bork cited Clinton's actions as evidence of the decline.

"We knew he was a liar, adulterer and draft dodger when he was elected the first time," Bork said. "Twenty or 30 years earlier that would have disqualified him."

Now America is being governed by Yale law graduates with 1960s attitudes, Bork said.

And he knows because Bill and Hillary Clinton were Bork's students when he taught at Yale law school in the 1960s.

"I used to say they were both my students," Bork said. "Now I say they were just in the room."

Bork said America's moral decline has been overlooked because of the strong economy.

"Economic abundance does not make up for a hedonistic society."

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