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Letters

Bum rap for best friend

I don't mean to downplay the significance of canine assaults as a public health problem, but I can't help but wonder whether the conclusions reached in "Some dogs are not a child's best friend" (SN: 6/18/94, p.399) are flawed. Among 178 biting dogs in Colorado, German shepherd and chow chow breeds were the most frequent biters. However, this doesn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that they are the most violent breeds or the breeds most likely to bite. Why?

First, we don't know the ratio of German shepherds and chow chows to the total purebred dog population in the region. If more people in Colorado own shepherds or chow chows, statistically these breeds could show up more frequently on the "biter" list. Second, some of the German shepherds in the study may have been trained as guard dogs and thus could be more aggressive.

Third, are we to assume that the 178 dog bites reflect all dog bites that occurred in the

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Cover: One of the earliest known predators, the bizarre beast called *Anomalocaris* from Earth's Cambrian period was originally misidentified as a strange type of shrimp. Here, a model of the creature (built for a Japanese television program "Planet of Life") demonstrates how it prowled the seas more than 500 million years ago. (Photo: courtesy NHK, Discovery Channel, Télé Image, and KBS.)



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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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region or only those severe enough to require emergency care? Many dogs are frequent and aggressive nippers, but these nips are usually treated at home.

Any of these factors could bias the study's conclusions about breeds most likely to bite. A more conclusive study would need to draw a random sample of all purebred dog owners in a region, with owners reporting the number of times their pet has bitten a family member versus a nonfamily member over time.

Andrea Frank
Wauwatosa, Wis.

On the evidence presented, these dogs bit because they were frightened and frustrated. The "most frequent biters" were older dogs kept chained in the backyard and possibly threatened by small children.

Five hundred eighty-five thousand dog bites per annum is an impressive figure in isolation, but it's barely two-tenths of 1 percent of the population. Twenty deaths per year is so minuscule as to resist calculation.

This study is careless and full of misinforma-

tion, outrageous conclusions, and unrecognized confounders.

Mary R. Standard
New York, N.Y.

The authors studied 178 dog-bite cases to determine which of nearly 200 recognized breeds of dogs are most likely to bite young children. Their results may be valid in Denver, but nationwide studies have shown for decades that the most frequent biter is the 25-pound Cocker Spaniel. Bites from 150-pound Newfoundlands, on the other hand, occur as rarely as Halley's comet.

Their comments range from insightfully true ("Young children are usually smaller than large dogs") to blindly false ("the alpha [dominant] dog is always the largest.") Finally, they issue a warning that explains everything: Dogs "are, after all, carnivores." What does that tell us? The dogs are biting from hunger? Or we are safer with herbivores, which would never attack a human? Tell that to a matador.

Milo D. Folley
Nicholasville, Ky.

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