

PUBLIC HEALTH

California Case of Plague Second Boy To Die There

Summer's Deaths Called Examples of What Happens When Rodents Are Allowed To Live Near Human Homes

A CASE of plague in a human victim has been reported by California health authorities to the U. S. Public Health Service.

This report follows closely on a warning issued by the American Medical Association that war conditions might cause a frightful epidemic of plague to sweep the United States (*See SNL*, Aug. 9)

Plague is prevalent on the Pacific Coast in fleas, rats, ground squirrels and marmots.

Recently it was reported spread to North Dakota in the fleas that infest squirrels there.

Although the little boy who died in Siskiyou County, California, of the dread disease plague is the second case that has occurred in that state this summer, there is no need for undue fear of a major epidemic in the opinion of Dr. Karl F. Meyer, director of the Hooper Foundation of the University of California, who has made a special study of this disease.

These two cases are the first since 1938 in California, Dr. Meyer said in response to an inquiry from Science Service. One case occurred last year in Idaho.

These accidental infections, he said, were examples of what may happen when, in an endemic plague area, rodents are permitted to live and nest near homes.

"The environmental factors so conducive to plague in the Middle Ages—the British manor—were reproduced on the ranch where the first case occurred," he said.

Suppressive measures against rodents, which carry the disease, are being taken, he said, but will have to be maintained for years to come. It will be difficult, he predicted, to educate everybody to beware of fostering squirrels, chipmunks and other wild rodents as pets in a region where plague is raging among such animals.

Both plague cases in California this summer took the lives of boys.

"The first case occurred in June on a ranch about five miles outside Yreka,"

Dr. Meyer said in answer to Science Service's inquiry.

"I made the diagnosis on the specimens which were sent to me. The patient died on the tenth day of his illness before the nature of the disease was actually recognized. It is strange that again a human case served as an indicator for the existence of rural plague in a county which was considered free from the disease.

"The infection of the boy was probably due to a flea bite contracted in the barn of the ranch. Personal investigation disclosed an open wooden grain bin and horse feeding troughs readily accessible to all kinds of rodents. The ground of the hallway between the bin and the stalls was teeming with fleas. An epizootic (epidemic among animals) disease was active on the ranch killing squirrels and rabbits, and thus it is apparent that infected rodents were attracted to the human habitations by the feed storage.

"Subsequent survey studies conducted by the California State Department of

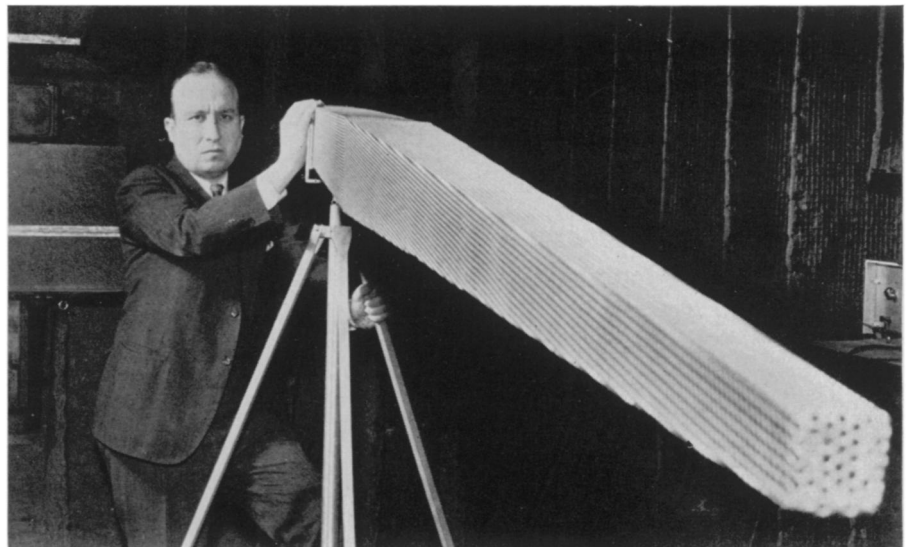
Public Health yielded infected fleas from squirrels and marmots shot on the ranch and in the vicinity. For the first time in the history of plague in California, a Douglas squirrel (*Citellus beecheyi Douglasii*) with the lesions of bubonic plague was found. Likewise two squirrels with tularemia were encountered in the same area. Thus plague and tularemia were responsible for the rodent deaths.

"The second case was seen by the writer on August 10. A five-year-old boy had died after an illness of three days. Shortly before death the swelling in the right groin was suspected as a plague bubo, and the attending physician proved the diagnosis by microscopic examination of the juice extracted from the gland. This case occurred about 40 miles south from the first case, at Mt. Shasta City.

"The family lives in an outlying newly opened tract of the town where chipmunks, squirrels, etc., were constantly attracted by garbage thrown in the back yard or rabbit hutches furnished readily accessible food to a variety of rodents.

"Dead squirrels were found a few hundred yards from the cottage. This case illustrates the risk for man to contract plague when he lives under primitive conditions with little concern relative to environmental sanitation. In an endemic plague area, rodents carrying infected fleas are thus brought close to man.

"Just as in South Africa, the Kraal



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