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For Immediate Release
October 2, 2008

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City Health Officials Issue Bat and Rabies Warning

Scarcity of Rabies Vaccine Cited

San Francisco, CA –City health officials are advising San Francisco residents to close their unscreened windows at night to keep bats from entering their homes and apartments. They are also coordinating with Animal Care & Control to educate the public about what to do when bats are discovered inside a room.

While it's always a good idea to avoid contact with animals that may carry rabies, the current nationwide shortage of rabies vaccine makes it particularly important for people to prevent getting exposed. Susan Fernyak, MD, Director of San Francisco's Communicable Disease and Control Prevention division, issued the warning just as the weather in the City warms up and residents, who enjoy the City's relatively insect-free environment, live and sleep in rooms with unscreened open windows which bats can enter. Because bat teeth are fine and needle-like people may not be aware that they or their household pet have been bitten.

"We have vaccine to treat anyone who has been exposed to a rabid animal," Dr. Fernyak assured. "But we want to avoid having to treat anyone who comes in contact with a wild animal that cannot be tested due to improper handling or having the animal escape."

Rabies vaccine is currently in short supply due to renovations of a vaccine production facility and insufficient stockpiles. Until supplies improve, rabies vaccine is only available for post-exposure treatment, and health care providers have been asked to coordinate their rabies vaccine orders with public health agencies to ensure that the limited supply is being used appropriately.

If treatment is received within a short time after exposure, it is highly effective. However, if left untreated, human rabies is almost universally a fatal disease.

In San Francisco, 12 cases (1-5 cases each year) of non human rabies have been reported since 2004. All occurred in bats.

Public Health and Animal Care and Control officials advise the public to never handle or provoke wild animals, especially sick or dead bats. If you find a dead or live bat, call Animal Care and Control at 415/554-9400 immediately to request that the bat be picked up. Do not handle or touch the bat and, if possible, do not let it escape. Instead, if safe to do so, close the door or windows until Animal Care and Control arrives.

"Prevention is always our best defense," Dr. Fernyak observed. "The current vaccine shortage requires all of us to take extra precautions to keep ourselves and our families safe from rabies exposure."

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