

THE NIGHT THE WOLF CAME

Victims saved from rabies by injections

ON a hot August night, a rabid wolf of exceptional size came into the sleeping village of Sahane, on the road from Teheran to Baghdad and Damascus. Situated halfway between the towns of Hamadan and Kermanshah, Sahane is a much-frequented, overnight pull-up and, on this particular night, a dozen or more lorries and buses had stopped there. Travellers and passengers were asleep either inside the ghavvehkhanehs (inns), or outside, because of the heat.

The wolf which had come down from the wild mountains surrounding the village, came in from the North-East, through orchards and vineyards where there are no houses but which, at that time of year, are guarded by watchmen who are supposed to keep the ripening fruit safe from marauders. However, they were asleep.

The wolf moved South, jumping across low earth walls and spiked hedges, and attacked 13 people, one after the other. Most of them were lying down and that is why many of them were bitten in the head. The wolf had reached the village itself. More and more people were bitten as they slept.

Its last victim was a horse, mounted by a peasant armed with a mattock. The peasant jumped from his horse, attacked, and finally killed the wolf with ten strokes of his mattock.

The wolf's head was severed from the body and sent to Teheran. Rabies virus was found in the wolf's brain by laboratory methods, and rabies virus was also recovered from several of the individuals who subsequently succumbed to the bites.

Golden opportunity

But this disaster which befell the village of Sahane proved a golden opportunity to the Pasteur Institute in Teheran. As long ago as 1950, the Expert Committee on Rabies of the World Health Organisation had taken cognisance of the fact that anti-rabies vaccine had been shown to be powerless in an appreciable proportion of patients bitten in the head by rabid animals.

The Expert Committee recommended further research into anti-rabies serum of high antibody level, which had already given encouraging results in the laboratory, and the undertaking of a field trial, as soon as conditions permitted, to determine the practical value of this serum when used in combinations with the existing vaccine. Because attacks on villagers by rabid wolves are frequent there, Iran was chosen as the country for investigation and the necessary preparations were made at the Pasteur Institute at Teheran.

The 29 persons bitten at Sahane were taken by lorry to the Institute. Eleven of the victims were bitten in the body or limbs, and 18 in the head. There were no deaths among those bitten in the body or limbs, this group having received the regular prophylactic course of vaccine.

Of the 18 individuals who received severe bites in the head and neck, 3 out of 6 who received the regular course of vaccine died, while only 1 died out of the remaining 12 who received the combination of vaccine and serum.

The most striking case was that of a 6-year-old boy whose skull had been crushed and the underlying membrane torn by the wolf's teeth, but he recovered after receiving six injections of serum combined with vaccine treatment.

This tragic episode thus provided convincing proof of the efficacy of anti-rabies serum combined with vaccine in preventing rabies in individuals severely exposed to this disease, and these results will undoubtedly be of great use in the future in many countries where rabies is an appreciable problem.