

Nottingham Telegraph

The Voice of the Region

Exclusive! Rabies on rampage in city parks

By Tess Tamoni, prize-winning Investigative Reporter

Vet student dies of rabies – local expert says ‘beware foxes in city centre and lock up your cats.’



(Left to right) A rabid fox, Sutton Bonington animal research facilities, and a map showing where rabies is found in Europe.

The Nottingham Telegraph has learned that a local veterinary student has died of rabies. Friends of the student, whom we are not naming to protect her family and friends, loved animals and was always adopting strays.

Rabies hasn't been seen in Britain for over a hundred years apart from in a few dogs brought back after WW1 and more recently dogs in quarantine kennels. Nowadays the quarantine rules have gone, and vaccinated dogs and cats can be brought into the country with pet passports, a policy that many feel has put the nation at risk.

More worrying, however, is that this student might have become infected from wildlife – the main host of the disease in Europe is foxes, which have undergone a population boom in British cities including here in Nottingham.

Rabies 'out of control'

Lucy Lastik is an ecologist specialising in foxes. From her lab at East Midlands University she told us that 'mathematical models show that if rabies were to get into urban foxes in Britain, it would be completely uncontrollable by either vaccination or culling.' In Europe, wild foxes are vaccinated by putting the genetically engineered vaccine into meat-

based baits and left out in hedgerows for foxes to eat. Dr Lastik's view is that, 'the fox populations in places like Nottingham are too dense for this to work – you would have to vaccinate 95% of the foxes to bring the disease under control here, compared to only 70% in, say, rural France.' What's more most British pets aren't vaccinated against rabies.

Cody Fendant, from Notts Best Pest Control Ltd, said: "Foxes are becoming more of an issue now simply because of the number of them that are being seen. We've not seen attacks on babies yet, unlike down south, but if we've got rabies locally that could become a real problem. In rural areas you can shoot them, but that doesn't go down well with clubbers, or police, in the city centre.'

Secret research group

A mysterious government group, working out of the notorious animal research centre at Sutton Bonington, are said to be investigating the case. Reporters from your *Notts Telegraph* contacted the group, which doesn't appear on any government web site but is believed to work closely with Porton Down on several dangerous diseases. We understand that this is an 'isolated case' and human-to-human spread is unlikely. The group did not comment on wildlife but an anonymous source insisted, 'there is no immediate risk' and asked us not to publish anything about the outbreak.

When we contacted QMC, spokesperson Mike Raffone said he couldn't release any information on individual patients without their consent, could not comment on rumours and had never heard of this mysterious group.

(see Editorial on page 12)