

Human-Animal Interactions: Travel-related Exposures in South Africa and Beyond

Michael Muehlenbein¹, Marc Mendelson², Davidson H. Hamer³, Philippe Gautret⁴, and Kristina M. Angelo⁵, for the GeoSentinel Surveillance Network

¹ Department of Anthropology, Baylor University, Texas, USA

² Division of Infectious Diseases and HIV Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa

³ Department of Global Health, School of Public Health, Boston University, Massachusetts, USA

⁴ Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Marseille, Marseille, France

⁵ National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Human coexistence with other animals can result in both intentional and unintentional contact with a variety of animal species. International travelers are often presented with opportunities for animal encounters during travel, which can lead to problematic exposures. These travelers risk injury and infection, and possibly death, from domestic and wild animal bites, scratches, and other exposures, such as licks or envenomations. To understand the diversity and distribution of animal-related exposures among travelers, we reviewed data from the GeoSentinel Surveillance Network from January 2007 through April 2018. Records were included if the exposure was non-migration travel with a diagnosis of an animal (dog, cat, monkey, snake, or other) bite or other exposure; records were excluded if the region of exposure was not ascertainable. A total of 5,864 animal exposures met the inclusion criteria. The majority (61%) of exposures occurred in Asia (Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal, India, China, and Vietnam); were among tourists (76%); and involved dog, monkey, and cat bites. GeoSentinel is event-based and uses passive surveillance collected from affiliate clinical sites; therefore, data from GeoSentinel cannot be used to estimate exposure rates or risk, but they effectively describe traveler demographics and frequencies of exposures in specific countries. Minimization of animal exposure risks ultimately requires education and behavioral barriers to limit human contact with other animals, supplemented by the use of pre-exposure rabies vaccination for travelers traveling to countries where rabies is endemic.