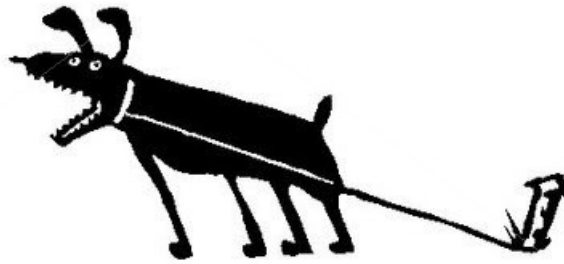


The Shepherd



By Phil Reichert

I saw the postman approaching my home. My neighbor's German shepherd made the same observation. The shepherd charged across the unfenced yard. Faster than Jessie James, the mailman drew his holstered mace and at pistol-drawing level, sprayed the liquid into the dog's eyes. Upon contact, Max yelped louder than a hungry baby. Max rubbed his paws into his reddened eyes as he commenced his retreat.

I felt sorry for Max. He was protecting his turf. Today, as I remember that postal carriers were not the only government workers facing attacking canines, my eyes tear. Health department employees aren't even given a canister of mace.

I spent several years doing field work for the sexually transmitted disease program, known simply in the early 1980s as the "VD Program." I had my share of barking-biting dogs. Even Chihuahuas, in their own minds, morph into pit-bulls when a stranger intrudes on their territory. Dogs protect their masters from intruders just as VD Investigators protect their masters from the smorgasbord of sexually transmitted diseases.

My colleague and fellow VD Investigator, Lisa, was deathly afraid of barking dogs in yards. Our duties require serving VD exposure notices to someone who may need testing and treatment...even when the house or apartment was protected by dogs. When there were sonorous pups that kept her from her appointed task, Lisa would return to the office and ask me to accompany her.

One day Lisa asked me to accompany her to a house with three dogs. She had been to the house earlier and decided she could not bring herself to step into the yard with the little yappers. When we pulled up to the house, I saw that the house had a chain-link fence and, yes, three small barking dogs. Even though their barks were loud, none looked as if they could do much damage if they got close enough to bite. If challenged, I was certain these mutts would back down. As I looked at the pups, I gave her a slightly disgruntled look saying,

“What! You’re afraid of three dogs that would lose a fight against a dying hamster?”

Lisa replied, “But, you’re here, and I would hate for one of them to bite me.” So, I opened the gate, stepped into their tiny tea-cup territory, and I shuffled to the door. The subject of the contact letter shooed the pups away and listened to what I had to say. As it turned out, the fearless dogs had protected their master temporarily from the news of his exposure, but my news shepherded him to the VD clinic for a penicillin shot and protection from syphilis.

A couple of months later, I was doing field work alone and found an address that was several miles out in the country, the home of another of our VD clients in need of some medication. I pulled up into a long, dirt driveway and opened my car door only to be greeted by one of the largest, most dangerous-looking (and sounding) German shepherds I had ever encountered.

A little history: When I was eight years old, a very large German Shepherd (when you’re eight years old, they’re all large) chased me down the street while I was riding my bicycle. I remember thinking that I could easily out-pedal the monster dog. Well, I learned that day German shepherds can run pretty darn fast. With his deep, truculent bark, he was gaining on me. In fact, he caught me, clamped down on my ankle and drew blood. He finally gave up when I refused to go down. But I kept pedaling for my life, tears running down my cheeks as I headed home.

Out in the country I looked at what seemed the direct descendant of the shepherd that bit me, and I understood why Lisa preferred to have someone with her when a pooch interrupted her field work. I had driven so far and spent so much time trying to find this STD client, I didn’t want to leave without having first delivering my message. Like the hero in an old western movie, I decided to leave the protection of my car and head for the door of the house. I knew I would draw fire from the dog the whole way. My only hope was to get to the door and to the safety of the porch without losing too much blood. My heart was pounding in my chest as I opened the gate and started for the door, but I figured owner would call off his dog when he saw me moving toward his door in an official looking manner. I glanced down at my Health Department ID and for a moment thought I saw a glittering gold star shining back at me.

I made it to the safety of the porch, and breathless, I knocked on the door. In a few seconds the German Shepherd, teeth glaring, would be at my feet. Of course, no one was home. I drew the paperwork out of my pocket and left it in the doorjamb. Then I whipped around to assess my retreat. I realized I would now have to make it back to my car without the protection I was counting on. The dog followed me to the gate barking with a vengeance every step of the way. Each time the dog would try to take a bite of my leg, he would stop with his snout in the country dirt. Interestingly, he never got closer than about twelve inches

from taking a bite out of one of my ankles. I had been all set to kick and punch, to fight my way to the end, but Cujo must have figured that barking loudly usually drove away intruders. Knowing that I had done my duty to protect the person who had been unknowingly exposed to a VD, I returned my shepharding duty to the homeowner's best friend. I hopped back into my car, heart racing, and I drove into the sunset with a good feeling about having helped the community contain another STD and with a new-found empathy for Lisa's feelings about barking dogs.

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The editors of *Healthy Stories* wish a Happy Thanksgiving to all our readers. May your turkey be sweet, may your family be neat, may you have all the blessings of this holiday season.