Cats in Connecticut

Cat scratch disease is usually a benign illness with spontaneous recovery within six to eight weeks but towards the end of 1991 two schoolchildren in Connecticut developed encephalitis from it. This led to a survey of the disease in the state of Connecticut and the results were published in the New England Journal of Medicine (Kenneth M Zangwill and colleagues, 1993; 329: 8–13).

Sixty cases of clinically diagnosed cat scratch disease were identified, the patients ranging in age from 1 to 57 years (mean 15 years). Fifty seven per cent were aged 20 years or less. The incidence was estimated to be 1.8 per 100 000 population. All of the patients owned cats and suffered from lymphadenopathy, most commonly in the axillae or neck. Four suffered from encephalopathy but all recovered.

A case-control study included 56 patients and age matched, cat owning controls. Factors strongly associated with cat scratch disease were owning a kitten, being scratched or bitten by a kitten, and owning a kitten with fleas.

Serological testing for antibodies to Rochalimaea henselae was positive in 38 of 45 patients tested and in four of 112 laboratory control sera. Antibody titres were highest in the first four weeks of the disease and declined over about six months. Eighty one per cent of patients' cats and 38% of control cats had positive serological tests. In the diagnosis of cat scratch disease a serum titre of antibodies to R henselae of 1 in 64 or more has a sensitivity of 84%, a specificity of 96%, and a positive predictive value of 91%.

The authors suggest that their data indicate a possible role for fleas as a vector of this disease.