



# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE PUBLIC HEALTH VETERINARIANS, INC.

## **CSTE POSITION STATEMENT 1999-ID 13**

**COMMITTEE:** Infectious Diseases

**TITLE:** Reptile-associated salmonellosis and prevention education

**ISSUE:** Tens of thousands of persons become infected with *Salmonella* each year following exposure to reptiles. Many infections involve infants and children, often with serious complications, including meningitis and sepsis. To mitigate this problem, persons who own reptiles should be provided appropriate education on prevention.

### **POSITION TO BE ADOPTED:**

CSTE and NASPHV recommend that appropriate state and local agencies enact legislation prohibiting the sale or gift of reptiles unless there is written point of sale education provided to consumers on the risks and prevention of reptile-associated salmonella.

### **BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION:**

Most, if not all, reptiles carry *Salmonella* as part of their normal intestinal flora and the risk of transmission from reptiles to humans is well documented. *Salmonella* may be shed intermittently in the feces of asymptomatic reptiles and common pet husbandry practices make fecal contamination of reptiles= skin and environment inevitable. Attempts to treat reptiles with antibiotics to eliminate *Salmonella* from their intestinal tracts have not proven to be effective and may lead to antimicrobial resistance.

During the 1970s, pet turtles were an important source of *Salmonella* infection in the U.S. and voluntary educational efforts were unsuccessful in resolving the problem. In 1975 and the Food and Drug Administration prohibited the distribution and sale of small pet turtles, which resulted in the prevention of 100,000 cases of salmonellosis per year. However, since 1986, the popularity of other reptiles as pets has increased. The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) estimates that in 1995 over 7 million people in the U.S. owned reptiles as pets. The sale of reptiles is currently the fastest growing segment of the pet industry and as a result, reptile-associated salmonellosis is an increasing public health concern. It is estimated that almost 100,000 cases of reptile-associated salmonellosis occur annually in the U.S. Many of the infections involving young children result in serious complications including meningitis and sepsis.

The public needs to recognize that reptiles are a possible source of salmonellosis for humans; that the risks posed by reptiles can be minimized if one handles the animals responsibly; and that reptiles are not appropriate pets in households with young children or immunocompromised persons. A major effort to provide risk information to the public via pet retailers was performed in 1996 and 1997 by CDC, many state and local health departments, and PIJAC. In spite of these initiatives, there does not appear to be a decline in illnesses, and the level of public health awareness about the hazards of reptile ownership remains low. Studies indicate that most reptile owners obtain information on reptile health and nutritional care from pet store owners and employees. Therefore, efforts targeting pet stores would be the most efficient venue for education. It seems unlikely that voluntary efforts at providing preventive education will be effective, and point-of-sale information needs to be mandated.

## **COORDINATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES:**

### **Agencies for Response:**

- Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, ASTHO
- National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, NASDA
- National Association of City and County Health Officials

### **Agencies For Information:**

- National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians
- Foodborne and Diarrheal Disease Branch, CDC
- Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council
- American Veterinary Medical Association
- Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians
- American Association of Zoo Veterinarians

### **CONTACT:**

Gail R. Hansen, DVM, MPH  
Kansas Department of Health and Environment  
Bureau of Epidemiology and Disease Prevention  
900 SW Jackson, Suite 1051  
Topeka, KS 66612-1290  
Telephone: 785-296-1127  
Fax: 785-291-3775  
Email: [ghansen@kdhe.state.ks.us](mailto:ghansen@kdhe.state.ks.us)