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The Underserved Community of Squirrels at Valhalla

David Bass and Dr. Fluffy Cheeks

INTRODUCTION

Living in our scenic piece of suburbia, we at New York Medical College often like to gaze out into the woods for a moment of tranquility. As I enjoy watching critters majestically jump from tree to tree, I learn to admire the grace of our furry friends. It is with great sadness that I bring to you a striking message; the quality of life of everyone's favorite flying rodent, the squirrel, is pitiable. When I first moved to Valhalla several months ago, I began a collaboration with our local squirrel physician Dr. Fluffy Cheeks, a New York Medical College alumnus who lives on my windowsill. Together we have learned that there is an issue with squirrels receiving primary care. This issue can be explained by the lack of available primary care squirrel physicians for the local population. Our study shows that squirrels live for a small fraction of their maximum possible lifespan. We hypothesize that additional primary care would solve this problem. It should be noted that this anecdotal data represents a very small subpopulation of squirrels that live outside my window, and should not be extrapolated to represent the entire squirrel population.

“Dr. Fluffy Cheeks, a New York Medical College alumnus who lives on my windowsill.”

DATA AND DISCUSSION

A typical grey squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*, has a life span 1-2 years, but with a maximum life span of 12 years in the wild, and 20 years in captivity.¹ Here in Valhalla most of the squirrels surveyed fell into 1-2 year range (Table 1). Local physician specialized in squirrel family medicine, Dr. Fluffy Cheeks, shared his insights on this problem with me. According to Dr. Cheeks, he is the only squirrel physician located within the 46.211500031-mile radius surrounding our campus. He reports that animals which have been under his care since birth have longer life spans. The average life span of a squirrel under his care from birth is more than double that of the average for Valhalla (Table 1). However, an average American human is expected to live for a much longer percentage of their maximum potential life span than any squirrel, whether in the care of Dr. Fluffy Cheeks or not.

Dr. Cheeks also pointed out that the area around NYMC and Westchester Medical Center is an especially densely populated region of squirrels due to the abundance of wooded area close by. He estimates that there is about one squirrel physician for every 200,000 squirrels within our immediate surroundings, and that this ratio will only get worse with time. NYMC was recently cited by the LCME for this deficiency. Overwhelmed by his own 200,000 pa-

TABLE:1 (ADAPTED FROM THE NOTES OF DR. CHEEKS)

Population	Average Life Span	Average Life Span/ Maximum Life Span X100 (%Max Life)*	Difference in %Max Life from Squirrels in Valhalla
Squirrels in Valhalla	2.5	20.8	0
Squirrels Under the care of Dr. Fluffy Cheeks since Birth	5.7	47.5	+26.7 P>>0.05
Average American Human ^o	78.8	78.8	+58.0 P>>>0.05

*calculated with 12 years as maximum life span of squirrels and 100 for humans (Saunders, 1988).

^o(CDC, 2013) life expectancy is used for the average life span of the average American human.

tients (especially during squirrel flu season), Dr. Cheeks has tried to send some of them to Westchester Medical Center for care; he is disappointed that they are repeatedly turned away. He understands that our human medical centers are not used to treating his species, and don't yet understand the investing potential of acorns. But he looks forward to the day when the American healthcare system will provide care to all Americans, regardless of the furriness of their skin.

CONCLUSION

Levity aside, there is a major and real problem with a shortage of physicians for some communities in the American medical system. In our lives we often face stress in the long journey towards the noble profession of Dr. Fluffy Cheeks, and it is important to celebrate the level of health and longevity that we can enjoy as humans. I, however, must inform you that the current whereabouts of Dr. Cheeks are unknown. During the blizzard of January 23rd, Dr.

Cheeks insisted on making crucial house visits during the storm. He has been missing ever since. He told me when he ventured into the storm that he may have to stay in the wild for an extended period, but hope is still alive. Regardless of what happens to Dr. Cheeks, I would like to dedicate this article to him. The best way to respect his memory is by forgetting our egos as he often did, and embracing our future opportunities. **Cheers to Dr. Cheeks and the unexpected virtue of day dreaming.**

REFERENCES

1. Saunders, D. A. 1988. Adirondack Mammals. State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry. 216pp
2. Hoyert, Donna L., Melonie P. Heron, Sherry L. Murphy, and Hsiang-Ching Kung. "Deaths: Final Data for 2013." National Vital Statistics Report (NVSR) 64.2 (2013)



Figure 1. Dr. Fluffy Cheeks is shown, when he was last seen journeying into the snow storm on that fateful afternoon in January.



Figure 2. Pictures from the parking lot – young squirrels waiting for Dr. Cheeks in their home in one of the trees.