

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1997

Daily News

Woman's foot lost in dog attack

Officials hunt animal in Shadow Hills area

By Amy Collins
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SHADOW HILLS — A team of specially trained officers combed neighborhoods Monday in search of a large, thin black dog that entered a home a day earlier and tore apart the foot of a comatose woman.

"The foot was completely severed from the leg," said Lt. Joe Hiltner of the Los Angeles Police Department's Foothill Division. "The dog was literally eating the woman's flesh."

The dog, possibly a Rottweiler mix or pit bull mix, slipped through a doggie door at the home in the 9900 block of Maude Avenue about 11:30 a.m. Sunday. The woman's mother discovered the animal attacking and chased it away.

At Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills, the remainder of the woman's foot was amputated Monday morning, said hospital spokeswoman Jennifer Bruce.

"Most of it was already severed when she arrived, but they did have to remove more," Bruce said. "It was actually amputated from the ankle down."

The woman was in stable condition and remained comatose. "It's really hard to tell if she experienced any other trauma because of her condition," Bruce said.

The identity of the woman, who is in her 30s, was not released by police or hospital officials.

Dr. Dena Mangiamale, the chief veterinarian for city animal control, said it's highly unusual a dog would eat human flesh. She said she didn't know all the details about the attack, but she guessed the dog might have been attracted by a smell, such as spilled food, a wound or even the dressing on a wound.

"Animals like smelly things," she said.

On Monday, the animal control department sent its three-person special enforcement team to the Shadow Hills neighborhood specifically to look for the rogue dog.

Police and animal control officials had not been able to find the dog, which reportedly has a white marking on its chest, said Peter Persic, the spokesman for the city Department of Animal Regulation.

The team was created in 1996 to round up packs of stray dogs roaming city streets because they are a threat to children and pets, and can cause traffic accidents and spread such diseases as rabies, Persic said.

Team members typically spend only three days a month in the San Fernando Valley, instead focusing in South Central Los Angeles, where problems with stray dogs are the most severe. Team leader Lt. Tim Goffa said that of the team's 20 working days a month, 12 to 14 are normally spent in Councilwoman Rita Walter's 9th District, where the problem is the worst.

The city sets aside \$170,000 to operate the team annually, Persic said. The department estimated that there are 735,000 dogs kept as pets in the city, but only 137,489 are licensed.

Exactly how many stray dogs wander the city is not clear. But between May 1996 and October 1997, the team picked up 16,032 strays, Goffa told the city's Board of Animal Regulation Commissioners on Nov. 10.

"It's a monumental problem and it's going to be a continuing problem for some time," he said.

Persic said the number of stray dogs began to increase when the department's budget was cut earlier this decade and there were fewer officers available to patrol. Now, the city is trying to catch up, he said.

Gini Barrett, the director of the American Humane Association's western regional office and a member of the city's animal commission, said Los Angeles has one of the worst stray dog problems in the country.

Barrett said it makes little difference if the dog involved in the attack Sunday was allowed to run loose by its owner or if it were abandoned earlier. "This all boils down to the same thing: lack of owner responsibility," she said.