

CAN A MAN build up immunity to the deadly bite of a cobra? Experts said it was impossible. But I wasn't convinced—so I decided to find out for myself.

I injected the first tiny diluted drop of cobra venom into my blood 14 years ago. In the next seven years, I gave myself more than 70 increasingly potent injections.

No one had ever tried such a thing before, and one authority warned that if I kept it up I would be dead within three years. But I continued, and I'm glad I did, for since then I have pulled through 33 cobra bites, any one of which might have been fatal.

The crucial test came last August when I was bitten by the deadliest of reptiles—the king cobra—and lived to tell about it.

As far as I can determine, I am the first person to survive the lethal strike of this "most dangerous of all wild creatures."

An ordinary cobra is four to five feet in length and can inject at least eight drops of venom in one bite. Death results within 45 minutes. But the king cobra that got me weighed more than 20 pounds. It was 14 feet in length, and it was capable of releasing no less than 30 drops of venom in a single blow.

I tangle with these deadly reptiles each Sunday afternoon at the Miami Serpenterium which I operate. My usual technique is to ease the king out of his cage with a hooked pole, keep him off balance on the hook, lay him down on the lawn, hold him at the tail, and then "fence" with him for anywhere from three to 20 minutes until I can grab him.

FROM THE MOMENT I take the king out of the cage, he's irate. He rears up to his famous striking stance, his hood spreads out in anger, and his cold, bronze, lidless eyes follow every movement I make. I watch him with equal intensity; in fact, I've been told I never blink while matching the king stare for stare, thrust for thrust.

In "fencing" with a cobra, I use the same strategy as an Indian snake charmer. He keeps the cobra busy watching the swaying of a musical instrument; I distract the snake by moving my right hand in front of him. Meanwhile, my left hand is inching up behind him so that I can grab him gently but firmly just below the head. Once I have the king, I milk him of his venom and return him to his cage.

Normally, I never allow myself to be distracted, no matter what goes on in the crowd of spectators who come to see the Sunday "show." If I should take my eyes off the king for even a fraction of a second, he may strike with unbelievable speed at the very moment my eyes shift. Until that fateful afternoon in August, I had always been able to move just far enough beyond the thrust of his fangs.

But this time the setting was different. Bob Anderson, a friend who is a professional photographer, had stationed himself a few feet to my left to get some close-up photos. I had promised him I would do nothing out of the ordinary merely for the sake of a good picture. And I had kept my promise—except perhaps at the moment when the serpent reared beautifully off the ground.

I'm not sure what happened after that. I do recall raising my right hand higher and higher, taunting the snake to rise even more dramatically. Suddenly, his eyes turned to my left hand, and I thought he was about to strike at it. But the snake's shifting stare was actually like a fencer dropping the tip of his foil to draw his opponent in—for his shift to the left was speedily countered by a move to the right.

I turned with him, swinging my right hand as far out of the way as I could. But it was too late; he hit me just above the knuckle of my right index finger.

It happened so fast that at first nobody thought I was bitten. Yet the king's strike was hard enough to yank one of his fangs almost completely out of his upper jaw. It hung by a mere thread of tissue.

As soon as I had completed my whiplash motion to the right and faced the crowd again, there were cries and gasps. My hand was bleeding profusely, gruesome evidence to my wife Clarita that the bite was a bad one. At the sight of it, she screamed hysterically—this was what she had been dreading.

I stayed calm, however; excitement only pushes venom more rapidly through the blood. Just as the king was about to strike again, I grabbed him behind the head. Then I removed the loosened fang, extracted venom from the other fang, and caged him. As I did so, he struck again, barely missing my face.

Meanwhile, my wife kept urging me to drop everything and go to the hospital. But I was confident of my immunity and felt I could take my time.

Normally, I could expect to feel a soreness in my throat within 10 seconds, then a heaviness in my eyelids, followed by weakness in the legs, shallow breathing, and creeping paralysis. But during the minutes I spent storing the venom and cleaning my instruments, I felt nothing but a slight burning sensation in the area of the bite. After I had washed the blood from my hand, I decided to go to the hospital, if for no other reason than to prevent pandemonium at the Serpenterium. The ride turned out to be more frightening to me than the bite. My wife, who was driving, reached 80 miles an hour and made the trip in less than half the usual 20 minutes.

On the way, I was devoid of symptoms, except for a swelling around the bite. Even after we got to the hospital, I felt as if nothing would happen. Several times I hopped out of bed and did calisthenics to prove the absence of paralysis.

Suddenly, however, my wife and Bob noticed that my face had turned gray and that my lips had lost all color. Although I was still feeling fine, I told them to order the first injection of antivenin (antidote for snake bites). Luckily, just then Dr. Ben J. Sheppard arrived. He is a polio

expert who has treated me often. Oddly enough, his specialty is not unrelated to snake bites. Both bulbar polio and cobra venom kill by paralyzing nerve functions and eventually shutting off breathing. I had ended up in an iron lung after one of my cobra bites.

Dr. Sheppard promptly took over and gave me my first antivenin shot. Then he checked my pulse, heart, and blood pressure. Everything was relatively normal and remained that way for the next 90 minutes.

I felt mildly elated. To anyone familiar with king cobra venom, it was something of a phenomenon. Even Dr. Sheppard was amazed, but he was more cautious than I. Several times I told him I was ready to go home, and his answer was: "Not so fast, young man." He was right.

THREE HOURS after the bite, I felt a powerful sinking feeling, as if my bed, drifting on a cloud, had dramatically plunged into a huge chasm. Then, within seconds, the sensation reversed itself and I was rising rapidly. Simultaneously, I felt my abdomen tighten—and, grimacing with pain, I called out to Dr. Sheppard.

One look at me and he jumped from his chair.

A check of my pulse, temperature, heart, and blood pressure showed they were all subnormal now. My skin was cold to the touch, and I began losing peripheral sensation in my body. My breathing grew increasingly rapid and shallow. I didn't know it then, but my heart was skipping beats, and I was in imminent danger of complete cardiac failure.

Everyone went into action. A hypodermic needle was plunged into my left leg, and to save time it was kept there, held fast by tape. Only the syringes were removed. One after another, they were filled with antivenin, then inserted into the needle in my leg and injected. At no time did I lose consciousness, and I never felt great pain;

but there was a constant sensation of sinking lower and lower with each shallow breath.

It was then I asked permission to see my wife. I spoke briefly, telling her not to let Bob Anderson feel guilty. His camera work at the scene was not responsible; I had made the mistake. I also talked about what my wife should do with the Serpenterium. At this, she burst into tears and ran from the room sobbing: "Bill's dying. He's dying."

Dr. Sheppard continued checking my heart and blood pressure every few minutes. At one point, he could not get a pulse; my systolic pressure had fallen to 80 and my diastolic pressure was zero. My entire neurocirculatory system was rapidly collapsing.

At 11 o'clock that night, Dr. Sheppard was about ready to put me in an iron lung when, just as suddenly as I had "fallen" into the chasm, my blood pressure began to pick up. A half hour

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To extract venom, Haast holds snake so it will bite rubber covering of flask.