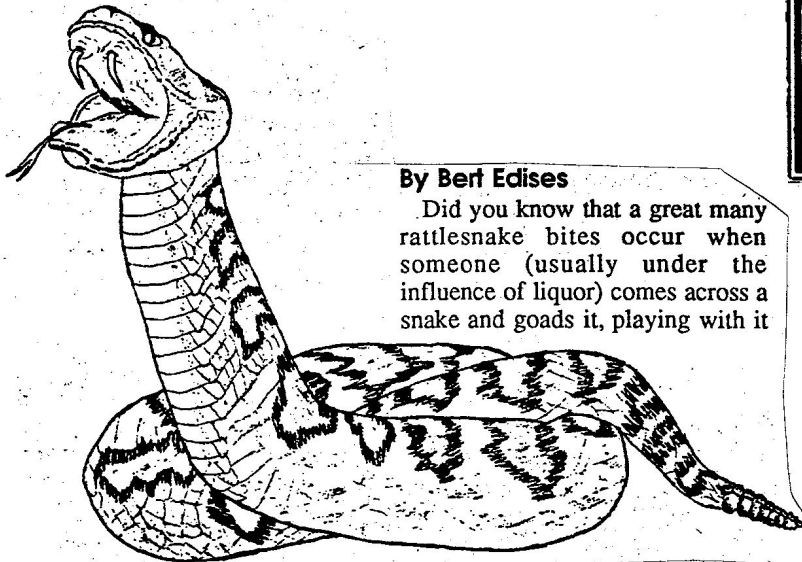


# A negative report on electric cure for snakebite

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**By Bert Edises**

Did you know that a great many rattlesnake bites occur when someone (usually under the influence of liquor) comes across a snake and goads it, playing with it

and trying to get it to react?

That was news to me. I couldn't believe there were so many loony people running around. But, my source was an eminent one, Dr. Donald Kunkel, toxicologist at St. Luke's Hospital Central Arizona Regional Poison Center, an authority on snakebite treatment.

It is Kunkel's firm belief that a high proportion of snakebite victims bring it on themselves.

I called the doctor to ask him about the new high-voltage electroshock treatment for snakebite, which has received ecstatic mention in sports magazines and even in some medical journals.

Whoa, back up, said Kunkel. The treatment's not really new and its value is highly debatable. Some time ago, a group of South American Indians were seen applying electric current to snake wounds; the results of the treatment were reported (anecdotally) to be wonderful.

Supposedly, the electricity made the venom harmless by altering its physio-chemical properties, and the stricken Indians walked calmly away to resume harvesting their maize or catching their fish.

The trouble with this idyllic picture of happy natives cured by



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the instant application of electricity is that it is purely anecdotal. There never has been a controlled scientific study of the method.

Recently, as a result of publicity concerning the electroshock snakebite remedy, researchers at a number of medical centers have started to test the cure. Among them is Dr. Richard Dart, consultant to the Arizona Poison Center.

Because of the difficulty and danger of testing on human beings, Dart has been doing his research on animals, primarily rats which have been bitten by diamond-backed rattlesnakes. Like Kunkel, his results to date have been negative.

Being scientists, neither doctor is prepared to state flatly that the electrical snakebite treatment is worthless. They say that until electroshock therapy has been tested in a controlled scientific fashion, snakebite casualties should stick to proven, conservative methods, the most important of which is prompt transportation to a hospital where antivenin can be administered.

These tested methods of treatment have greatly reduced the fatality rate from snakebite and should not be lightly abandoned for an untested method, which may turn out to be of no value.

There is an ancient Mayan saying - "Snakes do not good comrades make." If this precept were taken seriously by the many persons who think that poisonous snakes are toys to be played with, there would be fewer fatalities from dangerous reptiles.