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A CASE OF ENVENOMATION BY THE SOUTH AMERICAN COLUBRID, *PHILODRYAS OLFERSI*

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ONLY two opistoglyphous colubrids, *Dispholidus typus* and *Thelotornis kirtlandi*, are reported to have caused human fatalities (Fitzsimons and Smith, 1958; Pope, 1958), although others may be capable of delivering a dangerous or lethal bite (Fitzsimons and Smith, 1958; Mittleman and Goris, 1974). However, there are few detailed accounts of colubrid envenomation, especially by Neotropical forms. Neill (1954) and Heatwole and Banuchi (1966) described envenomation by species of the genus *Alsophis*, which are related to *Philodryas* (Magilo, 1970). Apparently, the only reports of *Philodryas* bites are those of Wucherer (1863) and Junior (1956). Wucherer stated that "I was once severely bitten by a *Philodryas reinhardtii* [= *olfersi*] without feeling the slightest subsequent inconvenience." However, Junior observed symptoms of envenomation, in two Brazilians, following *P. olfersi* bites.

In 1973 we maintained two female *P. olfersi* in our laboratory. We observed them kill and feed upon frogs, lizards and mice. An adult *Leptophis depressirostris*, bitten by one of the *P. olfersi*, was found dead 24 hours later.

At 1015 h on 8 October 1973 the junior author (27 years old, male, Caucasian, 77 kg) was bitten on the left hand between the thumb and index finger by a *P. olfersi* (female, 92.7 cm, 200 g). Only the snake's left fang penetrated the skin and it was withdrawn in about 4 seconds. Swelling was noticeable within 10 minutes and enveloped the entire dorsum of the hand within 7 hours (Fig. 1). The site of the bite was pressure sensitive within 20 minutes and the entire dorsum of the hand within 7 hours. The axillary lymph nodes of the left arm were enlarged by 2000 h and were intensely painful before 2300 h.

From 10 October through 11 October there was a reduction of swelling and axillary pain. Both manifestations virtually disappeared by 12 October. There was no nausea, increased temperature, or necrosis, and no evidence of hemolytic or neurotropic activity. The only medication was aspirin, two each at about 18 h, 27 h, and 36 h following the bite.

FIG. 1.—A comparison of the normal and envenomated hands 5 hours after the bite of *Philodryas olfersi*. Photo by Janice Mahlberg.

These data indicate that *P. olfersi* may be potentially dangerous to moderate sized vertebrates.

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