

EDITOR'S COMMENT

It would be of some interest to our readers if more information were available on the origin and use of colloquial terms for clefts and other craniofacial anomalies. I invite others to submit such material through the Letters to the Editor Department.

The Origin of The Term "Harelip"

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It is generally assumed that the colloquial term "harelip" in reference to clefts of the primary palate comes from the fact that a hare has an inverted V-shaped notching in the upper lip (Figure 1). Incidentally, hares and rabbits look much alike and are included in the same animal family, even though there are some subtle structural and behavioral differences between them.

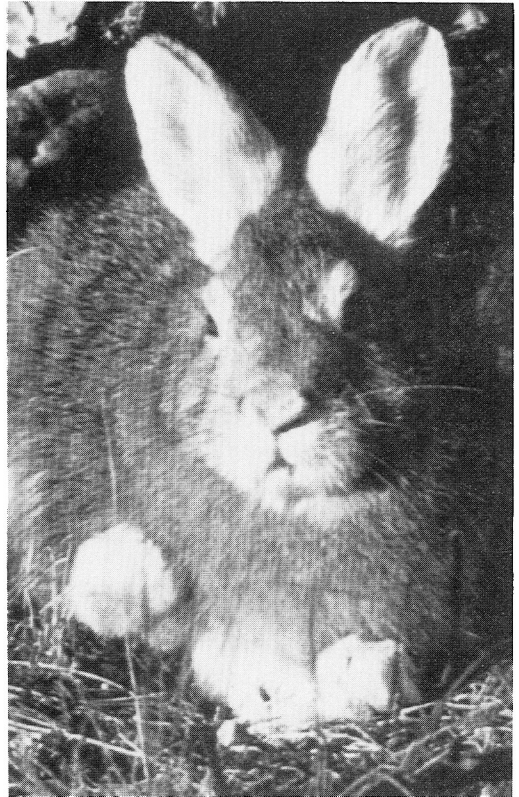
There are, however, many animals besides the rabbit or hare which have a partially divided upper lip, including members of the cat family (Figure 2), the llama and camel (Figure 3), the seal (Figure 4). It states in *Mammals of the World* (Third Edition, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1975) that the manatee or "sea cow" has an upper lip that is deeply split and each half is capable of moving independently. The split lip is used like a forceps in picking up food.

Why is it, then, that the congenital cleft lip defect was identified with a hare, when it easily could have been named after any number of other animals? Why was the hare singled out?

Is the term "harelip" universally used, or does some other term occur in different cultures, languages, and geographic regions of the world? Do some populations refer a cleft lip to an animal besides the rabbit, such as the camel or cat? I don't know the answers to these questions, and would appreciate any information which the readers might have.

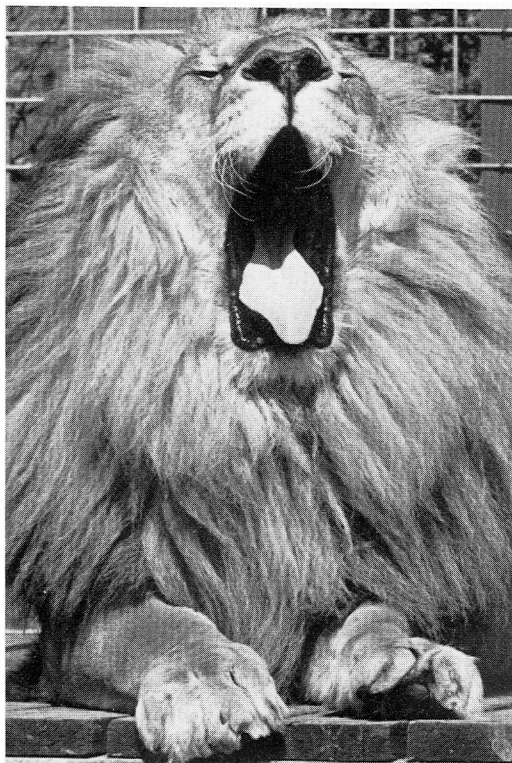
There is a genus of bats found in the Caribbean Basin, the Guianas, and the Amazon Basin called *Noctilio* which has a pronounced

notching of the upper lip (Figure 5). This bat used to be called "the hare-lipped bat" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume 5, page 598, 1960). Apparently, this name is no longer preferred, since current books refer to them as "fish-



eating bats". Nevertheless, the descriptions still identify the clefting of the upper lip. Thus, we see the name of one animal derived from the characteristic of another animal which is supposedly descriptive of the congenital human anomaly.

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We have all heard the folklore about the mother of a cleft child having been frightened by a rabbit during pregnancy. Which came first—the superstition or the term “harelip”? I would guess that the word “harelip” existed first, and anyone looking for a cause would seize on it. If other cultures refer to a cleft lip

by a name derived from some other animal or thing, do they have similarly associated superstitions?

Of course, there are many other impairments of the human body which are commonly named after an animal. To give a few examples:

pigeon toe (turning in of the feet while walking)

elephantiasis (hypertrophy and inflammation of the skin and subcutaneous tissues, especially of the legs and scrotum, due to obstructed lymphatic circulation, usually caused by a nematode worm)

charleyhorse (a popular name for a cramp or stiffness of muscle, especially of the leg or arm)

buck teeth (in reference to the male deer?)

cri du chat (French translation: “cry of the cat”; the high pitched cat-like cry produced by infants who have this particular congenital syndrome)

thrush (appearance of white patches in the oral mucosa, which later become shallow ulcers)

crow’s feet (small wrinkles, as the effect of age, under and around the outer corners of the eyes)

One could ask the same kinds of questions about these terms as I have about the term “harelip.” Even though they each have some rather obscure resemblance to a physical feature of an animal, why or how were those specific animal names associated with these impairments?



Acknowledgements: Figure 1. (Robinson, D., *The Encyclopedia of Pet Rabbits*. Neptune, NJ: T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1979, pg. 40); Figure 2. (*Lafayette Journal and Courier*, 217 N. 6th St., Lafayette, IN 47905); Figure 3. (Bulliet, R.W., *The Camel and the Wheel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975, frontispiece); Figure 4. (*Natural History*. American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th St., New York, NY, Volume 91, December 1982); Figure 5. (*National Geographic Magazine*.

Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, Volume 74, November 1938, pg. 663); The definitions of the human impairments named after various animals come from *Melloni's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1979.

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