UQ Bat Safety Awareness

Background
The purpose of this memo is to remind you that there are disease risks posed by bats in Australia. Bats are known to carry two infections which can pose a serious risk to human health - Australian bat lyssavirus and Hendra virus. Human infections with these viruses are very rare and when there is no handling or direct contact with bats, there is negligible public health risk.

Australian bat lyssavirus can only be transmitted to humans from bats, when infected bat saliva comes into contact with human tissue through an open wound or mucus membrane e.g. eyes, nose and mouth. Therefore it is very important that any handling of bats is avoided. Anyone who has been bitten, scratched, or has had skin exposed to bat saliva require immediate medical attention. Any bat in Australia may be infectious with Australian Bat Lyssavirus regardless of age or health. Humans are not exposed to the virus if bats fly overhead or feed or roost in gardens. Nor is it spread through droppings or urine, or if one lives, plays or walks near their colonies. For further detail, please refer to Queensland Health lyssavirus fact sheet.

Hendra virus outbreaks are rare. To date a small number of horses have become infected with Hendra virus, apparently after contact with a megabat or their body fluids. These megabats are known in Australia as the ‘flying fox’. There is no evidence that smaller bats, known as microbats carry the Hendra virus and there is no indication that humans can catch the virus directly from flying foxes. While the exact route of transmission is still not clear, it is thought that horses contract the virus after sniffing or ingesting matter contaminated by body fluids from an infected flying fox. Transmission of Hendra virus from horses to humans has occurred following high level exposure to the body fluids of infected horses. For further detail, please refer to Queensland Health Hendra virus factsheet.

What to do if you come in contact with a bat on campus
Persons who have been bitten, scratched or who have any other physical contact with a bat on campus should seek urgent medical advice and attend the medical centre on campus. If the encounter is after hours, they should proceed to a 24 hour medical facility or ring 13HEALTH. Where possible, without placing others at risk, the bat should be kept for investigation by the state veterinary laboratory. Only vaccinated people who have been trained in the care of bats should handle them. Security will contact the Department of Environment and Heritage protection (1300 130 372) or the RSPCA (1300ANIMAL) or local wildlife rescuers for removal. Unless it is part of your job, if you find an injured, dead or distressed bat/flying fox, do not attempt to handle it yourself.

First Aid - If you are bitten or scratched by a bat, the wound should immediately be washed gently but thoroughly (do not scrub) with soap and water. A virucidal antiseptic such as povidone-iodine can be applied. If eyes, nose or mouth have been exposed, flush the area thoroughly with water. A doctor needs to be consulted urgently to assess the need for further treatment. A vaccine and immunoglobulin therapy is available and must be given as soon as possible after the bite or scratch has occurred.

Bats in general are protected native species and some are an endangered species at both a State and Federal level. Any unauthorised attempt to disturb or kill a flying fox is illegal.