Really – How Many Deaths in Thailand Due to Venomous Snakebite?

I was reading today that by one estimate, 46,000 people die each year in India from snakebite and I thought I’d revisit this topic and see if I could find some good sources of information for snake bite deaths in Thailand.

One source, Suchai Suteparuk, M.D., Division of Toxicology, at Thailand’s most prestigious school Chulalongkorn University, cites in his paper “Bites & Stings in Thailand” there are about 7,000 bites by snakes in Thailand and about 30 deaths per year due to venomous snakebite.

That contrasts steeply with deaths in India. Why the massive difference?

Granted, in 2015 India has a population of 1,282,390,000 people, while Thailand’s is 67,400,000. India has nineteen times Thailand’s population to start with. But, 19 x 30 = 570 deaths in Thailand with a similar population. So why the huge difference?

Attitudes toward treating snakebite and ease of getting snakebite victims to adequate medical care. Thailand is doing extremely well in regard to both of these. Though there are still some who choose to treat bites by venomous snakes with magic potions and prayers, for the most part these superstitions are giving way to persons choosing treatment at local hospitals for venomous bites.
Keep in mind, the statistics found below give a range. This range is often rather large. Many countries release numbers that are low in the case of bites and snakebite deaths because they don’t want it to affect their tourism industry, and they want to be shown in a better light.

Also keep in mind that victims of venomous snakebite in Thailand are by far, locals and immigrants working on the land – farmers, rubber tree and palm tree plantation workers who are walking and working near the most dangerous snakes on a daily basis. Very few tourists are ever bitten by a venomous snake in Thailand. I cannot even recall seeing any in the news except a German man in Pattaya who kept cobras and was bitten by one of them and died. This may have actually been a creative way to commit suicide rather than an accidental bite.

Thailand vs. Other Countries (Snakebites and Deaths)

Burma (Myanmar)

2015 Population: 54,968,000
Snakebites per year: 8,800 – 14,600. “In Myanmar (Burma) Russell’s vipers are responsible for 90% of cases. In 1991, there were 14,000 bites with 1,000 deaths and in 1997, 8,000 bites with 500 deaths. Under-reporting is estimated at 12%.” Source: Thein-Than Development of renal function abnormalities following Russell’s viper (Vipera russelli siamensis) bite in Myanmar. Trans Roy Soc Trop Med Hyg. 1991;85:404–9.
Deaths per year: 340 – 1,000

Cambodia

2015 Population: 15,827,000
Snakebites per year: 800 – 21,500
Deaths per year: 80 – 700

Laos
2015 Population: 7,072,000  
Snakebites per year: 300 – 8,400  
Deaths per year: 80 – 700

Malaysia

2015 Population: 30,756,000  
Snakebites per year: 11,800 – 23,600  
Deaths per year: 8 – 80

Singapore

2015 Population: 5,540,000  
Snakebites per year: having some difficulty finding stats. Will update as soon as possible.  
Deaths per year:

Thailand

2015 Population: 67,400,000  
Snakebites per year: 7,000 – 9,100  
Deaths per year: 5 – 100

Vietnam

2015 Population: 93,387,000  
Snakebites per year: 30,000 – 118,000. “In Vietnam there are an estimated 30,000 bites per year. Among 430 rubber plantation workers bitten by Malayan pit vipers between 1993 and 1998, the case fatality was 22%, but only a minority had received antivenom treatment.”  
Source: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2700615/  
Deaths per year: 7 – 4,370

In comparison with Australia...

Australia

2015 Population: 23,916,000  
Snakebites: 41 snakebite deaths since 1980 (35 years). Source
Deaths per year: < 2 per year

Notes:


2. Most of the snakebite information came from two sources:
   - A cached Google page from: www.toxinology.org/gsi-epidemiology2.htm, which may no longer be available.
   - http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2700615/#CIT7