Taylor Gaes died after suffering from a rare case of the plague.

If you, like the rest of us, thought the plague had disappeared with the Middle Ages, gone the way of the Knights Templar and the feudal system; permit Newsmaker to disabuse you.

This month, 16-year-old Colorado student Taylor Gaes had a fever with aches and pains. His parents thought it was the flu. Two days later, he woke up coughing blood and was dead before they got to the hospital. State authorities this week revealed the shocking news that Gaes died from a blood borne strain of the plague, aka the Black Death, a vicious scourge of a disease that wiped out more than half of Europe’s population in the 1300s.

Evidently, you can still get it on a ranch in Colorado in 2015.

Rural Colorado does not seem to have much in common with the packed slums of mediaeval Europe where the disease once thrived. But it has become one of the last bastions of the plague. The local prairie dogs are to blame. Those gopher-like critters that look like a squirrel without a tail.

The plague is caused by a nasty bacteria, *yersinia pestis*, carried by rodents and transmitted to humans by their fleas. Gaes probably got bitten by a flea off a sick prairie dog that came onto his parents’ property, Larimer County health officials said. Because he did not have the common symptom of swollen lymph nodes, no one realised how sick the poor kid was until it was too late.

Now you know why that memetic internet sprite Drama Prairie Dog looked so intense. It was not kidding around.

Far from being eradicated, the plague still exists in wild rodent populations all over the world, triggering occasional outbreaks. About 2000 human cases are reported to the World Health Organisation each year - particularly from Africa - but this is thought to be a wild underestimation because it mostly affects poor people and frequently goes undiagnosed. There are about seven (usually non-fatal) cases a year in the US, mostly in rural Arizona, Colorado, California and New Mexico, according to the Center for Disease Control. Larimer County officials stressed there had been no other plague victims there for 16 years, which is a gift to their next tourism campaign: "Only one plague death since 1999!"
But there is good news, says Peter Collignon, Professor of Infectious Diseases at the ANU Medical School. Firstly, the plague is a bacteria which can be treated with antibiotics if it's spotted in time. "Deaths are mainly due to lack of treatment," he says.

Secondly, it's been eradicated in Australia - we haven't had an outbreak since 1925.

The first epidemic, triggered by the arrival of infected rats on boats in Darling Harbour in 1900, led to 103 deaths in a very panicked 8 months. Sydney authorities were ready, razing slums near the harbour and deputising citizens as rat-catchers with a lavish sixpence bounty per dead rodent. Lest you suspect an ulterior motive in the demolition of waterfront slums - this is Sydney, after all - be reassured Professor Collignon says better housing was actually a key part of the public health response in areas where rats were literally hanging from the rafters.

"When the rats got sick, they often fell out of the ceiling literally on to the ground, then the fleas jumped off rats onto people," he says. "So good housing made a difference."

That, and not touching dead rats, sleeping with your pets or hunting in areas with infected rodents, says the CDC.

Chief Medical Officer John Ashburton Thompson and his colleagues who fought Sydney's plague invasions went on to make the globally significant discovery that it was fleas that spread the plague to humans from infected rats. So now you know.