



Greater Awareness Can Prevent Human Deaths Due to Rabies and Reduce Phobic Reactions to Stray Dogs in India

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Abstract

Rabies is a fatal disease that can be prevented. Prevention is possible either by avoiding an exposure or by correctly dealing with an exposure as prescribed by international and national authorities. Prevention should not however be lopsided and detrimental to dogs; mammals that primarily mediate human infections. It should be achieved through public participation and greater awareness about dogs, and about the dangers of ignoring the exposure. This paper, discusses the prescriptions of WHO and the Government of India on how human deaths due to rabies can be prevented. It attempts to drive in the message that a multipronged approach is needed and highlights the significance of educating children about dogs and rabies.

Keywords: Rabies; Stray Dogs; Awareness; India; Prophylaxis

Abbreviations

ABC: Animal Birth Control; ARV: Anti-Rabies Vaccination; DMARRC: Dax Memorial Animal Rehabilitation and Resource Center; PEP: Postexposure Prophylaxis; PrEP: Preexposure Prophylaxis; WHO: World Health Organization

Introduction

Rabies, is a deadly, yet preventable disease. All warm-blooded animals are susceptible to rabies, although prevalence of rabies in rodents (rats, mice, squirrels, etc.) and rabbits is less likely and in birds, improbable [1]. Once contracted, the disease is fatal. Human deaths can however be prevented with prompt PEP [2].

According to WHO rabies is a serious public health issue in more than 150 countries. The issue is however, most acute in Asia and Africa [2]. Tens of thousands of deaths occur annually in these countries. Children under 15 years of age comprise 40%

of the casualty. Dog bites and scratches account for 99% of rabies-induced human deaths.

In India, 95% of rabies-induced human casualty is caused by dogs. Cats are responsible for 2% deaths. One per cent deaths are due to jackals, mongooses and other mammals [3]. The National Rabies Control Program is being implemented in India since its 12th Five Year Plan. Available data has endorsed an annual death rate of between 130 and 210 in hospitals due to rabies [3]. In solidarity with WHO's "Global Strategic Plan to End Human Deaths from Dog-mediated Rabies by 2030" [2], also known as the "Zero by Thirty" plan, India is on course to implement its first "National Action Plan for Rabies Elimination" [3].

At this juncture, it is therefore appropriate to discuss, briefly, some of the complementary actions that will work in tandem with the 'Zero by Thirty' plan. The discussion that follows will focus on the merits of public awareness in the fight against rabies in India.

Materials and Methods

The discussion that follows is primarily based on secondary/ published information supplemented with experiences gained since January 2011 in managing the Dax Memorial Animal Rehabilitation and Resource Center (DMARRC) of Care Earth Trust in Chennai. Apart from sheltering/rehabilitating abandoned dogs and pups, DMARRC provides weekly veterinary services (since 2011), free of cost, to local residents in Urapakkam, a village in the outskirts of Chennai.

Among others, awareness on rabies and ARV is being created locally. This has been possible with the support of the Animal Husbandry Department of Kancheepuram District (Tamil Nadu) by way of a free veterinary camp that was organized at DMARRC on June 5, 2015 and earlier, through one-day programs to commemorate World Rabies Day on September 28 until 2014. All dogs/pups that are three months or older are vaccinated and a card is provided to the owners with date of vaccination and due dates for follow up doses.

Results and Discussion

During the January 2025-January 2026 period alone, nearly 100 pups and dogs have been administered ARV at DMARRC. Administering ARV free of cost has encouraged local residents, many of whom are poor and illiterate, to avail of the facility and imbibe the need to follow it up with annual doses. The outreach service of DMARRC also encourages local residents to adopt stray pups, get them vaccinated and not abandon them.

Preventing rabies deaths in humans, mediated by dogs, needs a multipronged yet focused approach. In the north Indian city of Jaipur, a project that captured-neutered-vaccinated and released 24,986 female stray dogs between November 1994 and December 2002 witnessed a decline of about 28% in the local dog population. Local government hospitals also recorded zero human deaths due to rabies during the period, while dog-mediated rabies deaths continued to increase in other localities within the state [4].

WHO recommends PEP based on three categories of human exposure [2]. Category I: touching or feeding animals, animal licks on intact skin, Category II: nibbling of uncovered skin, minor scratches or abrasions without bleeding, and Category III: single or multiple transdermal bites or scratches, contamination of mucous membrane or broken skin with saliva from animal licks, exposures

due to direct contact with bats. Of these three, Category I does not require PEP. However, Categories II and III require PEP [2].

WHO also recommends PrEP for those who work in areas where exposure to animals (scratches/bites) is more probable as in labs and zoos and in rescue and rehabilitation centers that deal with mammals [2]. The Government of India's "National Guidelines for Rabies Prophylaxis" recommends PrEP for the following [3]:

- Laboratory staff handling the virus and infected material, clinicians and individuals attending to rabies cases
- Veterinarians, animal handlers and dog catchers
- Wildlife wardens, quarantine officers, etc.
- Travelers from rabies-free areas to rabies-endemic areas

The guidelines have also highlighted the recommendation of the Indian Association of Pediatrics that encourages PrEP for children. However, the option of taking it voluntarily exists [3].

As mentioned above, bats are not a concern in India but dogs are, as 95% of human rabies deaths are due to the canines [3]. That dogs are primarily responsible for mediated rabies deaths in humans has resulted in phobias that tend to see stray dogs as a 'menace'. Moreover, so-called rabies-awareness is increasingly portraying dogs as blood thirsty creatures (as commonly seen in posters in primary health centers and other public spaces). Local televisions that report dog bite cases (both of humans and livestock) tend to describe all dogs as 'rabid'. Overtly proactive steps such as these can prove to be counterproductive. They can also frustrate the government-sponsored ABC program that has been on for close to 25 years in the country.

The National Guidelines for Rabies Prophylaxis [3] has provided material for creating awareness in the public with a set of posters and a list of dos and don'ts. However, such material often does not reach the public as much as they have to. Public, especially the poor and illiterate, tend to ignore injuries caused by dogs, or they resort to home remedies of various kinds. The traditional wisdom of observing the dog for 10 days after it injures (scratches or bite) a person, and based on its behavior (also sudden death), taking a decision about undergoing PEP can also be dangerous, as depending on the condition of the victim and location of bite, the infection can spread and prove fatal earlier than expected.

Conclusion

Improving access to human rabies vaccines and providing technical guidance are critical to steps that prevent human deaths due to the dreaded disease [2]. Greater awareness among the public is equally important. As children under 15 constitute 40% of the human rabies casualty [2], more attention should be paid to protect them.

Irrespective of their economic status, children are fond of dogs. They do not hesitate to feed or play with them given an opportunity. They also readily pick up pups from the streets. At DMARRC, most often children bring pups that they picked up in the streets and want to get them vaccinated. This is a positive indicator of greater awareness.

Children can be easily educated about dogs, rabies and PEP. In India nature clubs and environment education have reached almost all schools. The National Green Corps program of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (Government of India) has had the widest reach since its inception in 2001. It can be used as a platform for creating awareness on dogs and rabies among school children.

Well-being of humans and dogs are equally important. It is therefore vital that greater attention is paid to building public awareness, especially in children, about dogs and rabies. When successfully done, this will greatly reduce the overt phobia for stray dogs, and at the same time, will guide well-informed decision-making wherever necessary. And taking cues from WHO, that has said culling stray dogs cannot reduce the risk of rabies [2], governments should devise alternate and more viable means by which the public are kept well-informed and protected. This will prevent avoidable human deaths and inculcate a greater sense of tolerance in people towards India's neighborhood dogs.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declares that he has no financial or other conflict of interest.

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