

Rabies Raises its Ugly Head Once More

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A three-year-old girl died at the Sungai Petani Hospital, Kedah of rabies on the 8th of January 1998. She had been bitten by a stray dog outside her house in Padang Lembu on 29 Nov 1997¹. She was the fifth victim in three years. Three people bitten by one stray dog died of rabies in 1997 in Kota Setar, Kedah. In the year before that there was one death from rabies also from Kota Setar. Previous to that a 68-year-old man died of rabies in 1992 after he was bitten by a dog in Guar Cempedak, which is also in Kedah. In all these cases rabies had not been suspected at the time of the dog bite and neither rabies vaccination nor immunoglobulin had been given. Public awareness especially among medical practitioners had been lacking. There had been no cases of rabies in humans in Malaysia from 1981 to 1989.

In this issue Loke, Murugesan, Suryati and Tan³ report on rabies in dogs occurring in Terengganu between November 1995 and June 1996. They found 9 nine rabid dogs in a state which does not border Thailand, where rabies is enzootic. It is a state where rabies has not been detected since 1952. It is unlikely that rabid dogs could have migrated to the coastal area of Terengganu where they were found. As the authors suggested, dogs with rabies could have been brought in by sea or road. However, the spread over time and the number of dogs involved, suggests that endogenous transmission has occurred.

Such a sporadic outbreak serves to remind us that although rare, rabies can strike anywhere in the country. The risk of this is increased in the current age of widespread public transportation, cross border migration and population growth. We are reminded that we can not afford to drop our vigilance for rabies in any dog bite incident. It is to the authors' credit that they thought of rabies and that all their dog bite victims were vaccinated. Most probably, it is because of that none of them suffered or succumbed to rabies. Perhaps the genteel nature of the people and animals

of Terengganu marked out the 'unusually aggressive' behaviour of the rabid dogs more noticeably.

The co-ordinated action of the State Veterinary and State Health Departments ought to be noted. Other states could follow the Terengganu model. In the current atmosphere of the tragic recent cases efforts for raising awareness regarding rabies would reach home strongly. Medical practitioners in particular, including those in private practice, need to be targeted and informed about the protocol for rabies prevention.

Malaysia sits in the middle of Southeast Asia, surrounded by Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam where rabies is enzootic. Our last major outbreak of rabies occurred at the end of the Second World War in 1945 when a large number of allied forces arrived in Peninsula Malaysia and introduced the disease through the dogs they brought with them from Burma⁴. The number of rabies cases among dogs rose rapidly the next year and from 1947 to 1951 over a hundred dogs were confirmed positively infected each year. In 1952 Selangor became most affected as the disease peaked with 218 cases that year. This prompted a National Rabies Control Programme of compulsory vaccination

Table 1
Number of confirmed animal rabies cases (1995-1997)

	1995	1996	1997
Kedah	nil	2	9 [#]
Perlis	nil	1	1
Terengganu	nil	10*	2

Source: Veterinary Research Institute, Ipoh, Malaysia

Note: All cases are in dogs from dog-bite cases as well as routine monitoring of strays except (*) where 2 cases were in cattle and (#) 1 case was in a cat.

of all dogs and a rigorous programme of destruction of stray dogs. This was so successful that by April 1954 it was possible to declare the country 'rabies free'.

The seven year outbreak had seen rabies affecting cattle (37 confirmed) and buffaloes (2), cats (12) and even goats (14). In subsequent years, however, from 1954 to 1958 only one or two dogs were tested positive each year and there were a few years, for example, from 1959 to 1962 where no cases were recorded in any animal. Many of us have perhaps taken for granted the fact Malaysia is rabies free. However, the few recent years have given cause for concern. In the last three years, for example, 25 rabies cases have been detected by the Veterinary Research Institute (Table I).

Perhaps, we need to review our 'rabies free' status today. The declaration in 1954 does not last forever. Although the disease is not enzootic, the record of recent years shows clearly that we are prone to sporadic outbreaks. As our recent currency and economic crisis highlighted to us, we in Malaysia cannot isolate ourselves from what happens to our neighbours. As long as rabies continues to be enzootic around us, with modern day travel rabies will come to our shores. Our rabies control efforts need to look at regional co-operation if we hope to be truly rabies free. For the present however, we must not neglect of course the strict enforcement of the current control measures including import and quarantine regulations, the maintenance of the 'immune belt' at the border with Thailand, licensing of dogs, the destruction of stray dogs and the mass vaccination of dogs in the 'immune belt'

References

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