

PROFESSIONAL AND PUBLIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION PROGRAMMES FOR SUCCESSFUL RABIES CONTROL AT THE ANIMAL SOURCE

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Although rabies is considered to be a totally preventable disease, every year over 55,000 human deaths occur most of which resulted from exposure to an infected dog. Almost every one of these human deaths occurred due to a lack of educational awareness about how to prevent rabies. Dog bite victims often seek treatment from local healers instead of visiting an anti-rabies clinic, governments often do not understand the cost-savings implications of instituting dog vaccination programs, children and their families lack awareness about the importance of responsible pet ownership, etc. Improving educational awareness about rabies control and prevention on all levels of society has proven to be a successful and valuable tool in reducing the number of dog bites and rabies cases. Rabies prevention educational programs have been launched in many countries as a direct result of World Rabies Day, held annually on September 28, the anniversary of the death of Louis Pasteur. Education is the first key to instituting behavioural change in communities that have previously not taken action to reduce the incidence of rabies in their neighbourhoods. The keys to changing the behaviour of dog owners that traditionally do not care for their animals include initiating discussions with the community to determine what it is that they want to accomplish regarding rabies control and then helping them to design a strategic plan to accomplish the goal. In order to establish a sustainable program, it is essential to establish a working group that includes all stakeholders that will ultimately be involved in the rabies prevention and control plan. This generally includes both the veterinary and medical profession at the Ministerial levels as well as representatives from the Ministries of Education, Finance, Environment and Legal. Mass public awareness campaigns are essential for securing the support of the citizens that will ultimately need to change their behaviour in order to make the program a success. There are many resources available to help initiate a rabies control program including the Blueprint for canine rabies elimination and human rabies prevention (www.rabiesblueprint.com).

