



OIE's commitment to fight rabies worldwide

Every ten minutes someone dies of rabies somewhere in the world. Rabies is reported to claim nearly 55 000 lives a year, though the true figure is certainly far higher. Ninety-nine percent of human cases are due to bites by infected dogs. Rabies causes more deaths in the world than any other infectious disease and especially affects children in developing countries.

In countries where people are still dying from rabies, dogs are the main vector. Controlling the disease in dogs, and especially stray dogs, must therefore be the first priority to prevent lethal cases in humans.

Analysts have estimated that just 10% of the financial resources currently used to treat people bitten by potentially rabid dogs would be sufficient to enable national Veterinary Services throughout the world to eradicate rabies at source in domestic animals and so prevent almost all human cases. Vaccination of animals is the preferred method of controlling and eliminating rabies. Indeed, for ethical, ecological and economic reasons, the culling of animals that are potential vectors cannot be considered as the priority method for control and eradication. All successful rabies eradication programmes have included measures combining stray dog population control and vaccination of all dogs kept under their owner's control.

We know that a rabies control strategy cannot be effective without the support of many different partners coordinated by the authorities, including the animal health services, environmental officers and the police force, and without the support of local and municipal authorities, NGOs and dog owners.

At the international level, the OIE, FAO and WHO are developing recommendations, in particular to ensure good intersectoral collaboration. Since 2010, the OIE's standards relating to rabies have been undergoing revision, the aim being to develop an approach that will allow the disease to be controlled in stages, with the emphasis on the epidemiological importance of the animal species most frequently linked to human cases (generally dogs). A new chapter being prepared for the OIE International Terrestrial Animal Health Code will make new provisions for "canine rabies free status" for countries.

The OIE's aim is not only to encourage transparency in notifying the disease but to encourage governments to invest in priority control programmes, such as rabies prevention in dogs, especially in those countries not managing in the short term to meet the requirements to make a self-declaration of rabies free status for all susceptible domestic and wild animal species.

Rabies control programmes are a major financial challenge for many countries as the costs, especially vaccination costs, are very high: it is therefore important to encourage research and industry to develop vaccines that will confer long-term immunity, thereby eliminating the need for booster vaccinations. In this context, the quality standards relating to the production of diagnostic tests and vaccines for rabies contained in the OIE Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals are currently being updated to take into account the very latest scientific developments.

The possibility of developing vaccine banks – at both regional and worldwide level – is also being studied by the OIE and the main international organisations involved in rabies control. Among its benefits, this project would help to ensure that, at times of crisis, high quality vaccines produced in accordance with OIE international standards are available and that in an emergency they can be delivered to developing countries to meet their actual requirements in the field. A vaccine bank for Asia is already being set up by the OIE in 2011.

It should be emphasised that veterinarians and the national Veterinary Services have a primary responsibility to apply their knowledge and skills to help control zoonoses, including rabies, and so break the link between the source of the disease in animals and human infection. Rabies control programmes should always take into account the need to improve the effectiveness of the public and private components of the national Veterinary Services, especially with regard to compliance with the international standards of quality issued by the OIE. To this end, the active participation of all countries in the OIE's PVS (Performance, Vision and Strategy) initiative to determine the Veterinary Services' level of needs in terms of investment and training is highly recommended.

A global conference on rabies control, organised by the OIE in collaboration with FAO and WHO, is due to be held in Seoul, Republic of Korea, from 7 to 9 September 2011. The conference will give priority to good governance regarding the distribution of public and private, local, national and international resources targeted at priority prevention actions, to be taken initially in animals, in collaboration with public health services.

Many potential donors are invited to attend in order to support programmes in developing countries.

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