

RODENTS

Get rid of 'em before it's too late

RODENTS are a common sight at eateries, residential areas, markets, recreational parks and many other places in broad daylight in cities.

It is a clear indication that the rat population has increased many fold and will soon pose a health threat if something is not done to control the population.

A recent rat survey in the Klang Valley gave the impression that rats have practically "invaded" the area and are breeding fast. At present there are no reliable statistics on the rat population. An estimate by a local rodent biologist has put the ratio at one person to eight rodents (1:8).

Dr Lye Hinds, world renowned rodent biologist from Great Britain, was quoted in an international news report that about four million rats are born daily in developing countries.

This is a cause for concern. Rats are disease carriers and harbour all kinds of dangerous pathogens — virus, bacteria, parasites and pathogenic fungi.

These pathogens have the po-

tential to wreak havoc on the country's public health systems if we overlook their zoonotic (transmission of animal diseases to humans) significance.

A scientific literature search on rodent diseases revealed that rodents spread about 70 different types of diseases to humans worldwide, either directly due to a bite wound by a diseased rodent or indirectly via consumption of food or water that have been contaminated with rodent faeces and urine.

The ecto-parasites of rodents like fleas, ticks and mites can also cause illness in humans and animals through their bites. These vector borne diseases in some countries are said to be emerging as a global health threat.

Studies on rats trapped in Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings by scientists from the Institute for Medical Research, Universiti Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia a few years ago, showed that the rats have been infected with at least one or more types of zoonotic pathogens.

The epidemiology (disease pat-



tern) of many of the rodent-borne diseases in Malaysia is poorly understood.

Biologists are concerned that rodents, especially those that live in close proximity with humans and their domestic/companion animals may pose serious health risks in time to come. They predict that rapid global weather change can facilitate new rodent breeding grounds and increase the risk of rodent borne zoonotic diseases being transmitted to humans.

There is concern and fear among public healthcare professionals that a major disease outbreak similar to the black (bubonic) plague may be triggered if we are not careful.

A nagging concern among biosafety professionals worldwide is that rats may soon be used to mount bio-terrorist attacks. It may be far-fetched but we should not dismiss the rat population growth in our cities as a potential health

threat.

The rapid advancement of science in biotechnology, especially in molecular bio-engineering has opened wide this possibility. In view of the obvious health and bio attack risks, the authorities need to think of a long-term plan quickly to check on the rodent population.

Poor sanitation, waste management and damaged drains have been cited as the major reasons for the rodent population explosion in the Klang Valley and other parts of the country.

Authorities should consider engaging a professional rodent control consultant to do a comprehensive nationwide study on the rat problem. If need be, the relevant legislative documents and administrative systems should be reviewed to ensure that it is adequate to meet modern day challenges and threats.

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