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Infectious diseases making comeback

More deaths from tuberculosis than dengue and HIV-related complications

PETALING JAYA: Every year, more people die of tuberculosis (TB) than from dengue and HIV-related complications.

There were 1,945 TB deaths from 25,739 cases last year, a 14.7% increase over 1,696 deaths from 24,220 cases in 2015, according to the Health Ministry.

In comparison, there were 237 dengue fever deaths from 101,357 cases last year and 336 deaths from 120,836 cases in 2015.

Malaysian health authorities are now concerned because infectious diseases such as TB, leptospirosis and rabies, which the country managed to successfully curb in the past, are making a comeback, said former Institute of Respiratory

Medicine director Datuk Dr Abdul Razak Muttalif.

TB is responsible for the most deaths among all infectious diseases reported in Malaysia, he added.

Malaysia managed to bring down TB cases from more than 30,000 in 1960 to fewer than 6,000 cases in the mid-1980s but Dr Abdul Razak said the cases gradually increased again from the mid-1990s.

It was initially fuelled by the increasing number of HIV cases (from weakened immune systems) and a little by migrant workers in the late 1990s, he said.

Dr Abdul Razak said one factor contributing to the high numbers currently was the delay in diagnosis and treatment, resulting in the dis-

ease spreading.

One reason for the late diagnosis could be traced to patients seeing doctors for coughs in clinics. Without laboratory facilities, some doctors did not get a chest X-ray done to detect it early, he added.

Other groups could pick up TB because of risk factors such as those with diabetes and HIV, as well as prisoners, drug users and migrants.

Dr Abdul Razak said Malaysia was detecting more cases also because more people were being screened.

Meanwhile, leptospirosis, commonly known as rat urine disease, remains a concern in Malaysia, as the number of cases has steadily increased from 2,268 in 2011 to

8,291 in 2015, although the figure dropped last year to 5,284.

Statistics show that in 2011, 55 people died of the disease, 78 in 2015, and 52 last year.

Universiti Putra Malaysia professor of veterinary bacteriology Datuk Dr Abdul Rani Bahaman said it was not easy to diagnose leptospirosis as there were more than 40 serovars, or strains, of *Leptospira* bacteria and more are expected to be discovered.

Leptospirosis could easily be misdiagnosed because its symptoms are similar to those of malaria, influenza and dengue. They include headache, diarrhoea, body ache, muscle pain and jaundice, which can cause it to be mistaken for these

viral diseases, Dr Abdul Rani said.

However, those returning from jungle trips or recreational areas with high fever should be screened for leptospirosis and treated with antibiotics as a treatment or preventive measure before the infection becomes critical, he added.

Encouragingly, statistics showed that leprosy – which spreads through inhaled droplets of moisture – is on the decline. There were 206 new cases last year, compared to 210 in 2015. In 2012, there were 325 new cases.



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Authorities can legally cull stray dogs

PUTRAJAYA: The decision to cull stray dogs in the event of a rabies outbreak should not be disputed as it is permissible under the law, said Veterinary Services Department director-general Datuk Dr Quaza Nizamuddin Hassan Nizam.

He defended the culling of stray dogs in rabies-infected areas.

"The incubation period can last up to six months. It's not something visible.

"If we have to put down a dog, then we will put it down. We don't want to take any risks," he said, adding that the department's main priority was to stop rabies from spreading.

Dr Quaza maintained that the two rabies cases in Kuala Sepetang near Taiping, Perak, were "isolated incidents".

"There is no need yet to carry out mass vaccination in Peninsula Malaysia outside of the rabies-infected area.

"We hope to solve the matter within a week," he added.

As the vaccine was not readily available, he said risk assessment had to be carried out before deciding on vaccinations outside of Kuala Sepetang.

He dismissed talk that the outbreak in Sarawak was due to local dogs mating with rabid dogs from Kalimantan, Indonesia.



Taking safety precautions: Perak Veterinary Services Department personnel vaccinating a dog belonging to Chew Thua Lek (top) and other pet dogs in Kuala Sepetang. — Bernama

"We don't know (what caused the rabies outbreak) actually. There have been positive cases of rabies in Kalimantan but the border is porous, where movement of people and animals happens all the time.

"The main problem is when infected dogs are brought in. It has nothing to do with dogs mating," he said.



Get vaccination as a precaution, pet owners told

PETALING JAYA: While the Veterinary Services Department has not made rabies vaccination compulsory, veterinarians advise pet owners to do so as a precaution.

Malaysian Small Animal Veterinary Association president Dr Amilan Sivagurunathan said it was up to individual owners to decide.

"The need for vaccination is on a case-by-case basis and also depends on the environment where pets are kept," he said.

Dr Amilan said there was a good chance that a dog kept indoors or in the house compound might not

need vaccination compared to one that roamed and mixed freely with other animals.

Dr Danny Soon, who runs a veterinary clinic in Klang, expects some worried pet owners to seek his advice soon.

Generally, he said, pet owners would be told to vaccinate if rabies was detected in their locality.

"This was what happened two years ago when rabies was detected in Penang," he said.

Dr Soon said the vaccine cost between RM80 and RM100.

Wayne Heng, a dog breeder in

Damansara Jaya here, said there was low awareness among pet owners who assumed Malaysia was rabies-free, as the last case was detected in 2015 in northern Malaysia.

"I usually educate my customers on rabies and how to take precautions," he said.

Fashiela Saifullezan, who sells imported cats, said she made sure both her cats and staff were vaccinated against rabies.

"We import cats and there are mandatory medical procedures to follow," said the owner of Kitty Cats Malaysia.

The need for vaccination is on a case-by-case basis and also depends on the environment where pets are kept.

Dr Amilan Sivagurunathan

Vet Dept puts down 19 dogs in Kuala Sepetang

IPOH: The Veterinary Services Department has culled 19 stray dogs in the coastal town of Kuala Sepetang where two girls were bitten by a rabid dog.

A department spokesman said the operation was carried out within a 1km radius of the scene. Some 305 animals were examined.

"Only one pet was vaccinated. We also conducted an awareness campaign for 275 townfolk," he said in a statement yesterday.

The girls were bitten by a two-year-old rabid dog earlier this month.

The department confirmed on Saturday that the dog had rabies and Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abd Kadir declared the Matang sub-district as a rabies-infected area.

Meanwhile, residents said stray dogs are a common sight in Kuala Sepetang, about 70km from here.

Businessman H.H. Ng, 60, said the dogs usually roamed the streets in the evening and early morning.

"You won't see them on the streets on a hot afternoon. They take shelter under the many stilt houses," he said.

"It is common to see motorcyclists, cyclists or pedestrians being chased or bitten by dogs."

Ng, who lives near the two victims, said rabies was a new thing for the residents.

He had advised the dog's owner to give it away after it bit almost all her family members.

"She was reluctant, having reared the dog from the time it was a puppy," he added.

Although the rabies inspection was going on throughout Monday, fishermen, coffeeshop owners and cruise operators went about their business unperturbed.

A large number of tourists was also seen.

Port Weld View Tour operator Ken Sin, who runs a river cruise by the coast, described the rabid dog incident as an isolated case.

"Tourism is an important sector here. Hopefully, it won't drive the tourists away," he said.