

# RE-ACHIEVING RABIES-FREE STATUS

**A** FEW months ago, we were all taken aback by the news of the sudden deaths of several children due to rabies in Serian, Sarawak, and Kuala Sepetang, Perak. The public continues to fear the sight of dogs (healthy or otherwise) in these areas as well as others.

Many have since called for the swift culling of suspected dogs, pets and strays that may harbour + the dreaded virus.

This is the mad dog disease, or locally known as *penyakit anjing gila*, a zoonotic disease where infected dogs display signs such as excessive frothing, uncoordinated gait, photophobia (an intolerance of light) and aggressive, depressive or bashful behaviour towards people, depending on the stage of the disease.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), rabies affects poor and vulnerable populations who cannot afford treatment or have difficulty travelling to medical facilities due to transport problems.

Youngsters are most susceptible to rabies as they frequently come into contact with dogs and other animals at home, the playground or the streets, and are less able to defend themselves from dog attacks than adults. However, anyone who comes into contact with dogs, especially strays, is at risk of being infected.

Animal lovers who are considering adopting strays from animal shelters or picking them from the streets are advised to seek information on vaccination programmes from vets or the authorities before buying or adopting them.

Preventive measures for this disease call for a concerted multi- and transdisciplinary, multi-sector intervention, such as the One Health approach and, of course, continuous surveillance of pets and strays in high-risk areas.

Recently, following the meeting between WHO, World Organisation for Animal Health, Global Alliance for Rabies Control and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation in Geneva in conjunction with World Rabies Day, the “Zero by 30” plan was announced. It aims to curb rabies

and achieve zero deaths from rabies transmitted by dogs by 2030.

We can minimise the occurrence or re-emergence of this dreadful disease by being more alert to its clinical presentations in animals and report free-roaming animals or unleashed pets showing unusual behaviour to


the authorities.

Staying away from animals suspected of having the disease, culling infected animals, complying with vaccination programmes for pets or potential pets, implementing the catch-neuter-release programme for strays to control its population and reduce the risk of disease spread, and proper disposal of animals that were euthanised as a result of rabies can prevent or curb its spread.

Continuous efforts are required to restore the rabies immune belt and achieve again the rabies-free status we enjoyed for the past 20 years.

**DR WAN MASTURA SHAIK  
MOHAMED MOSSADEQ**

Faculty of Veterinary Medicine,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

 ...rabies affects the poor and vulnerable populations who cannot afford treatment or have difficulty travelling to medical facilities...