

Case study

Protecting our health: animal welfare and disease prevention

Problem:

Human health is threatened by animal-borne diseases (zoonoses)

Rabies kills over 55,000 people each year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 'more than 99 per cent of all human rabies cases are transmitted by the bites of infected dogs'¹.

Reliable post-exposure rabies treatment represents a major financial burden for the people most at risk – those living in poor rural areas. In Asia, the average cost of post-exposure treatment is US\$49².

Like many developing communities, the municipality of Colombo City, Sri Lanka, attempted to control both the roaming dog population and cases of rabies by catching and killing hundreds of dogs every year.

But culling repeatedly failed to meet either goal: dog rabies cases remained relatively constant and local owners continued to abandon unwanted dogs, some of



Persistent problem. Culling does not lead to successful rabies control.

which received food and shelter from the community and managed to breed successfully.

Additionally, the animal suffering caused by cruel culling methods greatly upset local people and the municipality staff expected to carry them out. In May 2006, a presidential decree halting the killing of stray dogs in Colombo led to overcrowding and extreme suffering in the municipal pound. All capture, other than suspect rabid dogs, was halted later that year.

Solution:

A humane community-based dog population management and vaccination programme

WHO states that 'the most cost-effective strategy for preventing rabies in people is by eliminating rabies in dogs through animal vaccinations.'³

In 2006 the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) worked with local partners the Blue Paw Trust and Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) to develop a sustainable humane dog population control and rabies prevention programme for the area.

The comprehensive five-year programme, designed as a regional model for Asia, includes:

Training – CMC staff learn humane handling, catching and euthanasia methods for dogs suspected of suffering from rabies.

Community education – this key component uses school programmes and street theatre to encourage communities to be responsible for the care of both owned and roaming dogs living around them, as well as reducing the numbers of bites experienced by children.

Veterinary intervention – two mobile clinics offer sterilisations, WHO-approved anti-rabies vaccinations and basic treatment. Dogs are brought in by owners and by the Blue Paw Trust, who engage the local community in identifying and bringing in local roaming community dogs.

Communication and evaluation – sharing information between stakeholders to build a strong, sustainable programme.

Ongoing assessment – monitoring dog populations and their welfare; analysing bite data; assessing existing dog registration and rabies management activities; recommending the improvement and enforcement of legislation.

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Impact:

People are safeguarded by a reduction in animal-borne disease and animal attacks

Monitoring of canine rabies in Colombo City shows cases have more than halved since the humane programme replaced culling. As the dog population gets healthier and vaccination becomes routine for local owners, cases are expected to drop further and project cost reduce. In the same period, 2006-08, there were no human rabies cases.

Effective education

In 2008, educators trained in a Bite Prevention Education programme conducted puppet shows in more than half the government schools, reaching over 31,000 children. Dog bite incidences are expected to have reduced when monitoring is carried out in late 2009.

Preventive veterinary work

Vaccination In 2007, the clinics focused on addressing rabies in roaming dogs; 12 months later, they had vaccinated 89 per cent of the area's roaming dog population.

Sterilisation The percentage of roaming lactating female dogs has more than halved. This reduction in the reproductive capacity of local roaming dogs indicates that their overall population size will fall, again reducing the cost of the programme.

'Dog managed zones' Every dog in these four zones – established in partnership with public or private institutions – is sterilised and vaccinated against rabies, creating a stable, healthy population. Within the zones, stakeholders have been consulted and trained in caring for the dogs.

Better animal welfare

Eighteen months into the programme, the roaming dog population shows significantly improved welfare. For example, only 33 per cent of sterilised dogs have skin problems, compared to 48 per cent of unsterilised dogs.



Better together. Educational activities help make rabies vaccination programmes even more effective.

Conclusion:

Humane animal management can prevent the spread of animal-borne diseases

Sustainable, comprehensive dog population management and vaccination are proven to combat incidences of rabies in dogs and safeguard humans. This 'one health' solution is supported by WHO and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)⁴.

WSPA's programme in Sri Lanka adds to evidence that animal welfare should be integrated into public health plans tackling zoonoses – Colombo's dogs now pose less threat to human health than ever before.

¹ http://www.who.int/rabies/bmgf_who_project/en/index.html

² <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/index.html>

³ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/>

⁴ *Conclusions & Recommendations*, OIE First International Conference 'Rabies in Europe'; Kiev, Ukraine, 15–18 June 2005