



Several stray dogs are seen in the heart of Ipoh. Plans must be put into place to ensure the rabies outbreak is contained and eradicated. — Picture by Marcus Pheng

Education vital to fight rabies

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STRAY dogs are being culled daily since the rabies outbreak in Perlis, Kedah and Penang grabbed headlines in recent days.

The move is deemed necessary by the state governments as there has been an increase in dog-bite cases.

Malaysians, especially dog owners and animal lovers, together with the authorities are in a moral quandary as they ask themselves a heart-wrenching question — do we spare the strays and put lives at risk, or do we play dog and kill those furry four-legged beings?

While the discourse centres around the moral dilemma of culling against vaccination, a more pertinent question amid the outbreak is how can we stop this from recurring?

The facts

Rabies is one of the most deadly zoonoses — a disease transmitted from animals to humans — in the world. But it is also a disease that can be eliminated. Malaysia has been rabies-free since 1999, until recently.

According to the World Health Organisation, 99 per cent of rabies infections in humans come from dog bites; which explains the attention on dogs instead of cats, monkeys or other mammals susceptible to the disease.

Once a dog is infected with rabies, it usually means a death sentence for the animal. In the scientific community, it is termed as a dead-end disease. There are two types of rabies: the furious and dumb forms.

In the first type, an infected canine will exhibit unnaturally fierce behaviour, always growling and looking to bite or attack anything that moves. Paralysis

will then set in and the dog's jaw will become slack.

This is when it is very dangerous to humans and other dogs as the virus is most prevalent in its saliva. The paralysis will then spread to the heart and the respiratory system before the dog dies.

The dumb form, according to Perak Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) deputy director Dr Md Naheed Md Hussein, will see the dog acting normally.

"It won't attack people. You may not even know because it will be wagging its tail when it sees you. But when you try to pat it, it will bite," he said.

Firewall Perak

In Perak, the state DVS is on alert as three of the state's 10 districts — namely Larut, Matang and Selama (LMS), Kerian and Hulu Perak — share borders with Perlis, Kedah and Thailand.

The strategy involves spreading public awareness on the dangers of rabies and preventive measures against the disease, conducting surveillance around the suspected hotspot areas, vaccinating pet dogs and catching animals that are suspected of being infected for observation.

Most of the department's efforts have concentrated on a prioritised zone known as the "rabies immune belt". Spanning across four sub-districts in Hulu Perak, the government-designated area receives the majority of the department's anti-rabies measures due to its border with Thailand.

The department only provides rabies vaccinations in this zone. In other areas, private practitioners administer vaccines but the DVS will allow vaccinations outside the zone in the event of an outbreak or if an animal is being moved into the immune belt.

The department also holds seminars and spreads awareness among local pet owners in this zone. It has also extended

surveillance and educational efforts to Kerian and LMS districts since the outbreak occurred in Kedah and Penang.

Best strategy

Of the four strategies — education, surveillance, vaccination and culling — Perak DVS director Dr Norliza Mohd Noor says surveillance and education are the most important.

"Without surveillance, the effectiveness of the control strategy cannot be measured or proven. Only surveillance can tell us how rapidly it is spreading and where the affected areas are," he said.

"It is important to understand that the control of rabies can only be achieved with a combination of approaches.

"Dog culling alone has never been able to effectively control rabies. If people say so, then they are wrong. But those who say the only answer is mass vaccinations are also wrong. Each of the options cannot be treated as a plan in itself but prongs of the action plan."

There is much room for improvement in the registration of pet dogs despite the department's introduction of a "pet passport" four years ago. The pet passport programme sees animals vaccinated before a microchip bearing their medical record is attached.

This system, in theory, allows the safe movement of the animal across borders or states as the authorities are aware that the animal is healthy. However, many pet owners are not aware or uninterested in the initiative and response has been poor.

The relatively poor management of stray dogs throughout the country has to be also taken into account. Poor or insufficient garbage disposal services nationwide translate into rubbish dumps that resemble buffet lines for strays.

"When there is no proper disposal

in a certain area, it becomes prone to a large population of dogs because there is where they can find food. What would be ideal is to have animal-proof bins, regular collection of garbage and continuous education to prevent careless food disposal," said Dr Naheed.

Pet dogs and education

The status of the strays are key to rabies control efforts because they represent an unknown variable. No one knows if they are healthy or vaccinated. Crucially, their interaction with pet dogs is one of the ways that human infection can happen even if the strays don't bite anyone directly.

Dr Naheed notes the importance of pet owners preventing their pets from interacting with strays.

"They should never allow their dogs to walk around without a leash or alone, without the owner watching over them. If their pets do not interact with strays, we do not need to worry when the pets bite their owners," he said.

Education, both among pet owners and the masses, remains of paramount importance if we want to avoid the same situation from happening again. While the nation's eyes are focused on the rabies outbreak, the authorities must take this opportunity to spread as much information about the disease as possible.

It is all good and well to worry about culling the dogs now, but Malaysians must also think about how to prevent a similar situation from repeating. Rabies does not offer a second chance for man's best friend. Once a dog has rabies, there is no recovery.

Considering the tools available to eradicate the disease, everyone must play their part to ensure the country is rabies-free again — to safeguard the population and our furry friends.