

# Vaccination a better measure by far

**OUTBREAKS** of rabies in three states in Malaysia and commencement of culling as a control measure have created an urgent need to manage the disease. More than 99 per cent of all human rabies deaths are caused by a bite from an infected canine, so, controlling rabies in dogs is key to the solution. But, how is this best done? In our experience, we know that culling isn't the answer.

In many countries in Asia, most dogs roam, even the owned ones. It is commonplace for properties not to have enclosed yards to contain dogs, and letting dogs roam has long been

part of many cultures. Yet, roaming dogs can be seen as a nuisance and a threat, particularly when they can carry rabies — one of the world's most fatal diseases. Often, canine population numbers are not controlled giving rise to increasing numbers of stray dogs. Dog bites are also common.

It is difficult to identify a rabid dog. A common misconception is that a biting dog indicates rabies. Although biting behaviour can be a sign of an infected dog, not all dogs go through the furious stage of rabies. Healthy dogs can bite when they are scared, threatened or protecting territory,

food or pups.

Ridding the streets of dogs to eliminate rabies is a common perception. Governments want to be seen to be acting rapidly after an outbreak, responding to public pressure to protect their communities. Declarations of mass culls — killing all stray dogs has been a response seen time and again. And it has been the wrong one.

The misconception that culling is the most effective way of reducing dog populations causes enormous suffering both to the dogs and their communities. Methods used to kill the dogs, such as the use of the poison strychnine, cause shockingly painful deaths. In some horrific cases, dogs can convulse for over an hour until they finally suffocate.

Culling dogs has never been proven to be effective and may even lead to further spread of the virus. After a culling, population numbers quickly recover. The remaining dogs

breed. New dogs move into an area where food is abundant and shelter free from competition.

Often, owners of culled animals replace them. This is because dogs play an important part in our society. They offer companionship and serve as guard dogs, protecting crops and livestock. But, these animals are often unvaccinated against diseases such as rabies, which only compounds the problem and creates an endless cycle of cruel and pointless culling.

World Animal Protection advocates implementing evidence-based and humane solutions. All leading organisations committed to controlling rabies, including the World Health Organisation, the World Organisation

for Animal Health, the Global Alliance for Rabies Control and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations agree that culling of dogs does not curb the spread of

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rabies and, therefore, has no impact on reducing the incidence of rabies in humans. They also agree on the solution — mass vaccination of dogs, combined with health measures for people exposed to the disease and educating the communities.

Mass vaccination is a relatively simple concept. It also makes sense: achieve and maintain a vaccination coverage of at least 70 per cent of the dog population in an area to create

“herd immunity” — a barrier that prevents the spread of the disease.

With nowhere to spread, the virus dies out, and so does the primary source of human infection.

In 2008, the Indonesian island of Bali recorded its first outbreak of rabies. The government's initial response was to cull thousands of dogs: they mistakenly believed a dog-free island would be a rabies-free island.

But, the culling didn't work. By March 2011, the number of rabies cases had risen: nearly 60 cases in people and approximately 200 cases in dogs were confirmed. With the support of World Animal Protection and Bali Animal Welfare Association, mass dog vaccination was implemented — resulting in a dramatic decrease in human and canine rabies cases. This year, the Balinese authorities resumed culling, resulting in the rise of rabies cases in humans and dogs.

Like in Bali, culling won't protect

Malaysia from rabies. Vaccination will. It remains the case that not all communities want dogs, especially roaming dogs. A community's tolerance for dogs can guide the development of dog population management programmes to keep canine numbers at an acceptable level.

Education and raising awareness about rabies, dog-bite management and responsible dog ownership — along with appropriate legislation and enforcement — are all part of a long-term solution. But, the first step is to vaccinate the dogs. Let us work together to move governments and communities to recognise that instead of being the enemy, vaccinated dogs are the essential barrier and protectors of the community against rabies.

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