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Opinion

Position Paper on the Problem of Rabies in a Southeast Asian Country

Ferdinand S. de Guzman

Department of Family and Community Medicine, Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine, San Lazaro Hospital, Manila 1003, Philippines

Correspondence to: Ferdinand S. de Guzman, MD, Department of Family and Community Medicine, Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine, San Lazaro Hospital, Manila 1003, Philippines; Email: fdgzm06@gmail.com

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One of the oldest diseases, rabies is still a problem worldwide, where it is said that 2.5 billion people live in endemic areas. From "*One dies of rabies every 15 minutes*", the WHO has updated this to "*One person dies from the disease every 9 minutes*".[1] In Asia this is still a neglected disease.[2] In the Philippines, there is much awareness about the disease and yet the country failed to achieve the goal of being rabies-free by 2020. For now, the target has been reset to 2027, 3 years ahead of the WHO goal of 0 by 30. The reasons given are the shortage of funds for the modern cell culture vaccines and immune globulins and the lack of political will to control canine rabies, despite having a law, Republic Act no 9482, providing for the control and elimination of human and animal rabies, with penalties for violation and prescribing funds thereof.

Based on the Department of Health statistics released for the period 2015-2019, 1,403,041 patients were treated for animal bites in 2016,[3] and the numbers have not gone down from the million mark since then, and these are just government figures, excluding those seen by the private sector.

In this author's paper published at PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases in 2022, entitled "Clinical, Epidemiological, and Spatial Features of Human Rabies Cases in Metro Manila, the Philippines from 2006 to 2015", rabies remains a public health problem in the Philippines despite improvements in the availability of rabies vaccines and rabies immunoglobulins (ERIG) as post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). During the 10-year study period, human rabies cases were continuously admitted at San Lazaro Hospital with no notable decline in numbers by year. Most patients were adult men bitten by DOMESTIC dogs. The geographical areas in which cases commonly occurred during the 10-year period also did not change over time. Only 9.6% of patients had received at least one dose of a rabies vaccine as PEP. Although the risk of PEP failure is reported to be almost zero, two cases of PEP failure were identified.[4]

Concerningly, there has been an increase in reported cases in 2022 and 2023 to more than 350 per year. This year from January 1 to September 14, the Department of Health reported a total of 354 cases, 23% higher than the 287 cases logged during the same period in 2023.

San Lazaro Hospital, the country's biggest Animal Bite Center, where this author was connected for 26 years, recorded 14000 animal bites in the first week of May, 2024. The hospital through the years has observed an increase in animal bite cases during the summer months, the reason for the surge due to the pets being more irritable during heat.

Dogs remain the principal cause of animal bites, accounting for 98% of cases. The remaining 2% are brought about by cats and other bites. What has alarmed Infectious Disease experts like this author is that in 66% of rabies cases the responsible animals are owned, meaning pets. 92% of "*pets*" were either free roaming or occasionally roaming, meaning these could be considered as STRAY. Lately it has been a fad for dog owners to bring their pets to malls, although dressed and tied on a leash. But it is uncomfortable for customers of restaurants and food courts to be dining with a dog at the other table. Such is the discomfort and anxiety for those dining that some owners of these eateries have posted signs that say "*No Pets Allowed*".

For the Philippines to be rabies-free by 2027, focus should be on CANINE immunization, which is part of responsible pet ownership as mandated by the law. When the Rabies program was started, the focus was on animal vaccination, but this author has seen the shift from this direction to emphasis more on animal bite management. So from prevention of the disease, it is now more on PEP among animal bite victims. The lead agency in the National Rabies Prevention and Control Program is the Bureau of Animal Industry, under the Department of Agriculture.[5] The DOH through the Disease Prevention and Control Bureau serves as the Vice -Chair. If the Philippines is to achieve the target of being rabies-free by 2027, the Bureau of Animal Industry should be given more importance so that they would be able to eliminate, or reduce at most, the incidence of canine rabies. This author would like to see a better coordinated effort between the BAI and DOH. It is a fact that the key to the reduction of animal rabies is mass dog vaccination, at least or greater than 70% coverage. In the process, there would be accessible veterinary care services not only anti-rabies but also for other canine conditions. Animal Control laws should be enforced and there has been talk in the Philippine Senate to amend some provisions in the Law. Essential to the implementation of the Law is a bigger budget for the BAI to hire additional manpower and enhance laboratory testing for animal rabies. Of course the additional funding for existing LGU City and Municipal Dog pounds for stray animals.[6]

San Lazaro Hospital used to have an Animal House with a physician trained in the laboratory diagnosis of animal rabies. Oita University from Japan donated a PCR machine to facilitate diagnostic confirmation of animal rabies.

Failure to shift the emphasis from human rabies to animal rabies would lead to a second failure, not achieving the vision of declaring the Philippines as rabies-free in 2027. We are now entering 2025, that would mean just 2 years from now.

The strategic framework of the National Rabies Prevention and Control Program involves the alignment of two approaches, the first towards human rabies, which is to reduce the incidence of human rabies from 2.57 to 1.5 / million population by 2025, and the second towards animal rabies, which is to reduce the incidence of canine rabies from 6/100,000 dogs to 3/100,000 dogs by 2025. Both have targeted goals to be accomplished by 2025, and to ensure adherence to program policies and guidelines and compliance to R.A. 9482. Service delivery on the human side would increase PEP completion rate among registered animal bite victims to quality services and strengthen public-private partnership. Emphasis on financing would be to reduce out of pocket expenditures for PEP and ensure availability of National and Local budget. Strategies also include regulation involving accreditation and certification of animal bite treatment centers and availability of quality vaccines. Strengthening data information by institutionalizing NARIS (National Anti-rabies Information System) on the human resource aspect, health staff of animal bite treatment centers should be capacitated in the management of animal bite victims.

On the other hand, key strategies for rabies elimination in dogs involves socio-cultural, technical, organizational/one health aspects, policy and legislative and resources approaches. True strategies have their targets to be accomplished by 2025. The goals are noteworthy, but as the author has mentioned, time might be running out for the different stakeholders. The Bureau of Animal Industry should take a more aggressive stance, being the lead agency for the National Rabies Prevention and Control Program. Otherwise, another deadline not met would mean more lives lost. If it is of my consolation, the mission vision seeks to declare the Philippines as Rabies-free by 2027, an extension of 2 years. More time to solve the problem of rabies.

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