

High alert for rabies in KZN

An increase in rabies is anticipated in the near future

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THE KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture is on high alert for human rabies in the province following the death of four people between May and June who died after failing to seek treatment for dog bites.

Last year, eight people died of rabies in KZN, with the total number of rabies in animals reaching 203.

According to the department, they anticipate a possible increase in both human rabies and rabid dogs in the near future.

The problem is twofold: people who have been bitten do not always seek preventative rabies treatment after being bitten by an animal, and animals are not being vaccinated.

"Human deaths are perfectly aligned with the disease in dogs, which are the main source of rabies," said department spokesperson Mac Makhathini.

He said the prevalence of rabies in dogs is dependant on the vaccination coverage. He added that the province has experienced a decline in vaccinations being done due to inadequate support given to veterinary staff. He blamed the lack of adequate support on a number of factors such as limited funding for basic requirements like loudhailers, and "a lack of key posts being filled in management and field staff".

Another factor that is affecting the vaccination programme is the hijackings or attempted hijacking of state vehicles, which limits access to some areas. Makhathini said there has been a decline in public awareness since 2014, when the disease was almost eliminated, and he said the public then became "lax". Other problems he highlighted are a "lack of high-level political support and procurement problems and long delays".

According to Makhathini, key areas of concern include the Ugu District, eThekweni, iLembe, and Zululand, but he said they are continually campaigning there. He said that many people don't vaccinate their pets because of the costs at private vets or they have transport problems. "The state is making vaccines available to certain private vets to assist with free vaccinations, but this is area dependant," he said.

According to Makhathini, people are not always aware that they should immediately seek treatment for bites and said the responsibility to raise awareness lies with the Department of Health. He said his department does not have issues with getting the vaccine but said there are reports of the private sector finding it difficult to get the vaccine.

"Post-exposure rabies treatment is available free of charge from most government hospitals and larger clinics.

"Private veterinary practices have been extremely active in assisting with vaccinations, especially around urban areas, and are contributing significantly to control and surveillance of the disease," he added.

"Special mention must be made of the SPCA and other welfare groups who also contribute a massive proportion of the surveillance samples in the province, as well as vaccinations."

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• CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

UNDERBERG farmer and top canoeist Graeme Anderson (29) died in 2012 after contracting rabies through a dog's saliva. Anderson's mother, Trish Anderson, is urging people to get vaccinated, even if they just come into contact with a strange animal.

"My son was driving and saw a little dog.

"It just looked sick and hungry.

"A few years ago, rabies had been almost eradicated so we didn't even think about it. It was the last thing on our minds, we didn't even consider it.

"If we had, he would have sought treatment."

Trish said her son had just arrived back from a holiday in Mozambique when he complained of a sore back.

"The next morning, when I called, he told [me] he was battling to breathe." She said he was admitted to hospital that day and the next morning Anderson phoned her to say he thought he might have rabies.

"He called a farmer friend because he could not drink water. The friend suggested he try to take a shower and he just couldn't do it."

She said he told the doctors but that they did not expect rabies to be the issue.

"The night after he told me he thought he had rabies, the hospital called to say he was hallucinating and that he might have rabies." The doctors put him into a medically induced coma to try the Milwaukee protocol. This is when the patient is put into a coma and then given antiviral drugs.

Anesthetics are then reduced if the body shows signs of fighting the virus off. The method worked for a 15-year-old Wisconsin girl Jeanna Giese, however, it is not a certain cure for the virus and more often than not, does not work.

Trish said her son was the first person in South Africa to have the treatment, however, after being in a coma for five weeks and showing no sign of brain function, the family and doctors decided to take him off life support.

Trish said it had been an extremely difficult time for them, and said she would never want another family to go through the same thing. "Just do it. Vaccinate your dogs and cats and get vaccinated if you come into contact with strange animals. My son contracted the virus after the dog he picked up licked his hand. He then rubbed his eye and the saliva entered his system. It's not just a dog or cat bite or scratch that can infect a person. People need to be more aware and seek treatment when these things happen."



Animal lover and well-known canoeist Graeme Anderson died in 2012 after contracting rabies from a dog he had picked up that looked "hungry and sick". The dog in the photograph is not the rabid dog. Anderson contracted rabies after the stray licked him. Anderson then wiped his eye and the saliva containing the virus entered his body.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

