



AIDS FUELS OWNERLESS FERAL DOG POPULATIONS



A recent ownerless feral dog cull in KwaZulu-Natal.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic in KwaZulu-Natal is believed to be behind an explosion of ownerless feral dogs that are roaming the countryside, increasing the risk of rabies and savaging two people to death in separate incidents last year.

Veterinary workers are estimating a 50% increase in ownerless feral dogs in country villages while in the burgeoning Richards Bay/Empangeni industrial area the chief vet believes the figure to have doubled or even tripled.

Izindaba has confirmed that feral dogs were responsible for the deaths of 7 people last year, including the fatal mauling of a 2-year-old child and an elderly man and the infection with rabies of the remaining victims.

Euthanasia campaign

The phenomenon has led to a campaign by veterinary services, the SPCA and several municipalities to put down hundreds of ownerless dogs and a pilot research project that may prove a link between AIDS mortalities and the increase in feral dog packs.

In two distinct areas, Vulindlela near Pietermaritzburg and Richards Bay on the north coast, state vets and animal health technicians have put down more than 800 ownerless dogs over a 12-month period.

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Acting regional director of veterinary services for northern KwaZulu-Natal, Dr Shashi Ramrajh, said she personally 'put down 670 dogs captured and brought to the SPCA kennels in Richards Bay in 2003'. This had led to a direct and dramatic drop in rabies in the area.

'Last year (2003) I had 40 positive dogs – this year (2004) it's down to 25,' she said.

The dogs were roaming in peri-urban and rural areas, much of it with heavy vegetation, including cane fields.

Last year 270 dogs across the entire province were diagnosed rabid through the central Allerton veterinary laboratory in Pietermaritzburg, a 30% decrease on the previous year (2003).

Vaccination stepped up

Rabies vaccination campaigns had already been stepped up across the province by the time its Head of Agriculture, Dr J Mjwara called an emergency meeting of 'stakeholders' in mid-December last year to discuss a common strategy.

'Rabies has suddenly become a very sensitive issue because of the human deaths,' said Dr Mark Warren, a senior state veterinarian at the Allerton laboratory.

His colleague, Kevin le Roux, an animal health technician who is just beginning research that will include probing the AIDS/rabies link, told *Izindaba* that he and his staff were finding a '50% if not more' increase in ownerless dogs in country villages.

'We're finding it's everywhere we go, not just one area,' he said.

Feral packs feared

Local communities were pleading with them to eradicate the roving dog packs which they claimed were attacking domestic animals and children, stealing food and killing their own dogs whenever the pets tried to defend their territory or food bowls.

'I was flabbergasted when I responded to one call at Vulindlela,' said Le Roux.

'It's a small community and everyone said it had been going on for ages – I eventually destroyed 77 dogs, and that's an absolute fraction of the problem population,' he said.



Vets taken by surprise

Le Roux said his surprise was fuelled by an assumption he and his colleagues held that the population of ownerless dogs in the province was relatively small.

'We came across several homes where the family had died off through AIDS and the rest of them had splintered off and abandoned the kraal. In one we found eight dogs and no people,' he added.

He firmly believes AIDS is responsible for the ownerless feral dog population explosion and says what he has seen so far indicates it to be 'the tip of the iceberg'.

Feral pack members were mostly in good physical condition, which indicated that they had become highly efficient hunters and foragers, he said.

The poverty cycle

Poverty-stricken and AIDS-ravaged villagers could also not afford to feed their dogs or have bitches spayed, which simply added to the feral population. 'Within 2 - 3 years, two dogs can have produced 24 puppies and these also become feral as people can't afford to feed them,' Le Roux added.

What he called the 'taxi syndrome' also aggravated the spread of rabies as Zulus, who traditionally hunted with packs of dogs, would travel long distances in search of wild game.

Le Roux says his primary research focus will be a dog 'census' so he can establish what percentage of the entire dog population the 475 000 canines that were vaccinated last year represents. Vaccinations in previous years averaged around 300 000 dogs per annum.

Dr Uma Nagpal, head of the Centre for Disease Control in the KZN health department, said there had been 6 human rabies deaths in 2002, 9 in 2003 and 7 last year. Human rabies cases last year were at or near Nqutu, Eshowe, Tugela Ferry and Harding.

Major challenges included inappropriate treatment, insufficient knowledge of protocols by health care professionals in some 'pocket' areas, lack of early health-seeking behaviour, ignorance about rabies and a high workload due to increased demand.

Under-reporting

'The problem is that not all human cases are reported,' she added. Similar under-reporting among canine cases was echoed by Le Roux, who said suspect dogs were often killed by community members and simply buried.

Nagpal said post-exposure prophylaxis worked well in humans, but only if the case was reported at most within 3 days. This was how long it took the virus to travel along the spinal cord to the brain, especially if the bite was on the upper body.

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Ramrajh said that last year 11 stray dogs were diagnosed with rabies in the Empangeni area alone – out of the 25 total positive canine cases in her huge northern KZN jurisdiction that year. 'If we go on a clean-out of stray dogs we'll definitely win with our rabies but we don't have a dog census so we don't know what we're reaching (with vaccinations).'

Last year rabies cases in her area included 2 goats, 1 cow and 3 'beautiful' polo ponies belonging to a distraught owner. She said the stray dog population in the burgeoning industrial region around Empangeni and Richards Bay had doubled or tripled in recent years.

Her priority was reaching the deep rural areas where packs of hunting dogs

with 'a dozen, 20 or even more' members were often seen. The owners that her staff tracked down were reluctant to have their 'greyhounds' vaccinated because they believed it would impede their hunting performance.

'But we've also been adding Ivomec for mange and the heavy internal parasitic infestations they mostly have, so that's a selling point for us,' she said.

Ramrajh confirmed that rural folk were 'beginning to complain of members of households who have died', and that 'they feel threatened by the wandering packs of feral dogs'. However, she firmly declined to comment on a possible AIDS/rabies link, saying there were no conclusive data on which to base an opinion.

Rabies advice

Her advice to health care professionals treating rabies was to 'make sure the wound is completely cleaned out', and that whenever there was a third-degree bite (deep puncture wound or break in skin), to inject immunoglobulin. She said most bite victims were children.

Dr Jenny Randles, a veterinary epidemiologist at Allerton laboratories, said rabies in KZN peaked in 1995 with 400 confirmed (mostly canine) cases before 'plateauing out over the next few years', and then dropping to 200 last year.

Le Roux said the mongoose had received a 'very bad rabies press', and that dogs were mainly responsible for spreading the disease. Mongoose species in KZN were solitary and did not live in colonies.

While many provincial officials and veterinarians emphatically distanced themselves from 'sensationally' linking HIV/AIDS to rabies, they conceded that there might be a link between AIDS mortality and the increase of ownerless feral dogs.

Chris Bateman