

World Rabies Day – September 28th 2009: Don't take it for granted that Ireland is Rabies free

Rabies is a viral disease that is most often transmitted to humans by a bite from an infected dog. Once symptoms of the disease develop, rabies is almost always fatal, with only 6 known cases of persons surviving after onset of symptoms, and only 2 of those not having severe brain damage¹. However rabies is a disease which can be prevented by vaccination. It can also be successfully treated if the patient has access to prompt medical care after exposure. Despite this it kills 55,000 people each year, half of which are children under the age of 15. This is one death every 10 minutes, and these deaths could be prevented if the will was there to provide the resources necessary.

The Veterinary Ireland Companion Animal Society (VICAS) – the representative body for companion animal (pet) vets in Ireland - is supporting the aims of World Rabies Day: to raise awareness about the impact of human and animal rabies, how easy it is to prevent it, and how to eliminate the main global sources. However VICAS also wants the general public in Ireland to understand how lucky we are that we do not have this disease.

“Thankfully, we don't have rabies in Ireland but we should never take that for granted”, according to VICAS chairperson and Wicklow Veterinary Surgeon Alan Rossiter. “Ireland is one of only 25 countries in the world that are officially ‘Rabies Free’, with 14 of that 25 being islands of the Caribbean or South Pacific! Only 3 countries in mainland Europe are Rabies Free (Norway, Sweden and Finland). No country in Africa is Rabies Free, only one country in the Americas is Rabies Free (Uruguay), as is only one country in Asia (Taiwan – an island). The other Rabies Free countries are the UK, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand and Australia – all countries surrounded by water!”

Explaining why we should be grateful for our Rabies Free status, but never complacent, Mr. Rossiter goes on to say “A nip from a dog here, whilst traumatic, does not lead to the same grave concerns that would arise in countries where rabies occurs, where 55,000 people die a year from rabies, with half of them being children under 15. This is one person every 10 minutes dying a preventable disease. In Ireland we all take it for granted that we or our children are not going to die a slow, agonising and terrible death from a nip from a dog.”

The good news is that rabies is easily preventable and, with concerted effort, can be controlled and eliminated. “Vaccination is extremely effective at preventing rabies, in both humans and animals”, continues Mr. Rossiter. “Rabies has virtually been eliminated from mainland Europe by vaccination of susceptible wild animals and pets. This is one of the great but unsung achievements of the EU. Indeed many countries still require mandatory rabies vaccination for pet dogs and cats to ensure they are not a rabies risk to their owners.”

Asked if it was required to vaccinate pets in Ireland for Rabies, Mr. Rossiter answered in the negative. “Whilst thankfully we don't need to vaccinate pets for rabies in Ireland, there it is a requirement that all dogs and cats that travel into to Ireland from mainland EU, and many other ‘qualifying’ (i.e. lower risk) countries, must have a rabies vaccine prior to entry under the EU ‘Pet Passport’ scheme. In addition there are requirements for the animal to be identified by means of a microchip and be blood tested to ensure the vaccination has worked. This last requirement (the rabies blood test) is scheduled to end in July 2010 and whilst this may seem to increase the risk of importation the fact is that rabies has been practically eliminated from the EU and the risk is now extremely low. Let us hope that this success can be replicated worldwide and that deaths from rabies can be dramatically reduced in the coming decade. With concerted effort and the required resources this can happen, with India for example being well on the way to eradicating rabies.”

More information on World Rabies Day can be found at the official website, www.worldrabiesday.org or the WHO rabies website <http://www.who.int/topics/rabies/en/index.html>. Rabies information/FAQs is available at http://www.oie.int/eng/ressources/RABIES_EN_DISEASE_CARD.pdf

References

1. *Recovery of a patient from clinical rabies—Wisconsin, 2004*". *MMWR. Morbidity and mortality weekly report* **53** (50): 1171–3. December 2004.