

World Rabies Day Gains Momentum

Initiative promotes prevention of disease in cats, dogs, and humans.

By Marissa Heflin

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World Rabies Day, to be observed Sept. 28, is building momentum since it was initiated in 2007 by United Kingdom charity Alliance for Rabies Control and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

With the aid of 74 countries, the global initiative has helped educate more than 54.3 million people about animal and human rabies prevention. That number should increase this year, said Peter Costa, global communications coordinator for the World Rabies Day Campaign.

Events have been planned in at least 30 countries. To date, the campaign has received inquiries from 180 countries, nearly doubling the inquiries from 2007, Costa said.

"Not only is this a strong indicator of the need for this unifying campaign, it shows the potential for us to spread our message into parts of the world where rabies education is most needed," he said.

Rabies claims the lives of about 55,000 people a year around the world, and one person dies from rabies every 10 minutes, a fact that has spurred so many companies, universities and nonprofits to climb on board.

One example, on a much larger scale, is Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health, who is once again supporting the Afya Serengeti project by donating free rabies vaccines. The Swahili name is translated as Health for the Serengeti.

Sarah Cleaveland, Ph.D., from the Center of Tropical Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, started the program in 1997 to eradicate rabies in the Serengeti. It began as a research project, but evolved into a rabies control program that works with local people in the Serengeti to ensure vaccination of domestic dogs.

A vaccination zone has been set up around the Serengeti National Park with regular clinics where dog owners can bring their pets to be registered, vaccinated, and marked with a plastic collar to show they have received the vaccine.

Before the program, there were 60 rabies cases per 1,000 households with 84.2 percent being traced to domestic dogs. Now that the campaign has been embraced, the size and duration of the outbreaks have been reduced, and human rabies cases have decreased.

The number of households reporting animal rabies cases is down from 27 percent in 2003 to only 2 percent in 2006. Bite injuries from rabid dogs have also declined from 10 percent of households reporting bite injuries in 2003 to 0.6 percent in 2006.

In addition, the control of rabies has led to the resurgence of the African wild dog, which was wiped out after a rabies outbreak in 1990. It was thought to have originated in the village dog population surrounding the park.

When a U.S. veterinarian vaccinates a pet with a Continuum canine or feline vaccine between now and Dec. 31, Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health will in turn donate a dose of rabies vaccine to the project. Up to 150,000 doses of vaccines will be donated. Worldwide, the company will provide up to 250,000 doses of its rabies vaccine for the project.

Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health has been donating vaccines to the project since 2004, amounting to about 600,000 vaccines.

The company will also provide a new Land Rover to help with the rabies vaccine distribution to the Afya Serengeti team.

"U.S. veterinarians and staff feel great knowing that they can positively impact basic veterinary care and human health in Africa through their support," said John Janelli, marketing manager, Companion Animal at Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health. "Clients having their dogs vaccinated for rabies will have the satisfaction of knowing they are doing the right thing for their dog while, at the same time, helping dog owners in another part of the world eradicate this serious disease."