

World Rabies Day Gains Momentum

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

By Marissa Heflin

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The World Rabies Day Campaign aims to educate people about animal and human rabies prevention. 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.

At press time, events had been planned in at least 30 countries, but the number was expected to increase as the observance grew closer. 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.

For example, Bayer Animal Health of Shawnee, Kan., is partnering with Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine through a sponsorship of veterinary student events.

“We firmly believe that human rabies is completely preventable through proper animal stewardship,” said Bob Walker, director, Communications and Public Policy at Bayer Animal Health. “Education regarding responsible vaccination to prevent rabies is to the benefit of both humans and animals.

“As a global animal health company, Bayer has a strong commitment to education and to the health and well-being of animals. Our participation in World Rabies Day is just one example of that ongoing commitment.”

Merial of Duluth, Ga., is sponsoring a rabies symposium at Tuskegee University in Alabama, where U.S. and international speakers will offer national and global perspectives of this public health threat. The company will also sponsor symposiums in Russia and various educational events in Pakistan.

“[Rabies] is an important disease,” said Bob Menardi, DVM, veterinary spokesperson for Merial. “The awareness of it is critical to keeping it managed and that’s where our focus is, to make sure veterinarians are educated so they can in turn educate the public.”

Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health of Millsboro, Del., also is a sponsor of World Rabies Day. To raise awareness of its commitment to rabies eradication, the company will host fundraising events featuring African food at a number of its U.S. locations in September.

On a larger scale, Intervet/Schering-Plough Animal Health once again is 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 feline or canine vaccine between now and Dec. 31, 2008, 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.

Other companies planning to participate in World Rabies Day include Fort Dodge Animal Health of Overland Park, Kan., Novartis Animal Health of Greensboro, N.C., and Nestle Purina PetCare Co. of St. Louis, Mo.

Rabies at a Glance 55,000 people around the world die from rabies per year, mostly in Africa and Asia. About 60 percent to 70 percent are children ages 5 to 15. 100 children die of rabies every day. One person dies of rabies every 10 minutes. 7,000 animal rabies cases were reported in the United States in 2007. On average, one to three human rabies cases are reported per year in the United States. 74 countries participated in last year's World Rabies Day. World Rabies Day reached 54.3 million people in 2007. In Mexico, five years of a dog vaccination campaign reduced human rabies deaths from 60 per year to less than 20.

Source: Alliance for Rabies Control

World Rabies Day Partners

World Rabies Day partners include the Alliance for Rabies Control, American Animal Hospital Association, American Association of Feline Practitioners, American Veterinary Medical Association, Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, British Veterinary Association, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, Kansas State University, National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, U.S. Army Veterinary Corps, World Organization for Animal Health and World Veterinary Association, among others.