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Animal health is in our DNA

Afrivet Press Release

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Vaccinations are critical to eliminating canine rabies in South Africa

Rabies is a fatal disease. As a pet owner, you can contribute to major health organisations' goal to eliminate human deaths from dog-transmitted rabies by 2030. Have your pet vaccinated today!

Durban - KwaZulu-Natal has reported a spike in rabies cases, and the lives of two children in the area have been claimed. It has been estimated that rabies kills one person every 10 minutes globally. The tragedy lies in the fact that these deaths are completely preventable. Rabies is a fatal viral disease that affects all mammals and is transmissible from animals to humans. The virus is transmitted via the saliva of infected animals through licks, scratches, bites and contact with mucous membranes. It is important to note that South Africa has two types of rabies, rabies in dogs and a different subtype circulating in mongoose. According to information available, at least 39 animal rabies cases have been confirmed in KZN and 17 in the Eastern Cape province since the beginning of the year. This does not include the figures of the other South African provinces, and the worst part is that there are many cases that go unreported.

According to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WHO), 56% of global human rabies fatalities occur in Asia and 44% in Africa. This explains why major health organisations, including WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, have pledged to eliminate human deaths from dog-transmitted rabies by 2030. Dr Didi Claassen, from Afrivet, believes that achieving this goal is possible in South Africa with strategic planning, sufficient pet vaccination and joint efforts of the veterinary and medical professions, as well as pet owners. Everyone must play their part.

Children are inclined to play with animals and not realise the risk after being scratched or bitten, so they are the age group most affected, which is devastating. While rabies is a 100% vaccine-preventable disease, vaccination is often neglected due to the lack of awareness, cost, and access to registered health professionals. It is crucial to get the proper medical help when being exposed to an animal possibly infected with rabies by immediately alerting a medical practitioner.

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Education is key, and community members need to understand how to treat a wound that might lead to infection. Any bite wound or saliva contact from either a dog or cat needs to be washed with soap and water for at least 10-15 minutes as soon as possible after the contact, and thereafter, urgent medical assistance must be sought. Medical practitioners should also know who to contact for advice when confronted with a suspect rabies exposure case to ensure that the correct post-exposure protocols are followed.

While Covid-19 has increased our germ protection awareness, there has been a setback in the immunisation and prevention programmes for rabies, and this has contributed to a poorly immunised pet population and the spread of this disease. Vaccination of pets is the most effective way to reduce the risk of this disease. Rabies vaccination of pets is enforced by law in South Africa and available at no cost from your local state veterinary officials. Some private veterinarians also provide rabies vaccinations at a reduced cost. The awareness campaign themes that were initiated in 2020 by veterinary stakeholders during the Covid 19 pandemic was 'End Rabies: Collaborate, 'Vaccinate'. This is aimed at raising awareness about the disease and bringing together partners to enhance prevention and control efforts nationally.

In response to the high number of cases reported and the relaxation on Covid 19 restrictions, vaccination campaigns have been rolled out in KZN and will continue throughout March 2021. Similar campaigns are organised in other provinces after rabies outbreaks. Pet owners should be on the lookout for these advertisements and warnings issues by their provincial veterinary services.

Dr Didi believes that public education and awareness regarding rabies, especially in the rural areas where rabies is more common, will benefit this cause. However, people should not feel relaxed in urban areas, either. Rabies-knowledge saves lives. Recently, vaccination campaigns have been delayed in some areas as there have been issues surrounding the safety of the provincial department's immunisation crew and high jacking of their vehicles. It is important for communities to support these vaccination crews; they are there to serve and protect and should not feel unsafe.

Dr Didi says that the main take-home message is that pet owners should vaccinate their pets. The South African government offers free rabies vaccinations at state veterinary facilities for both dogs and cats (the latter are often overlooked in rabies outbreaks and vaccinations).

In KZN, more than 200 000 doses of vaccine had been issued across the province for vaccination campaigns. KZN residents should seize this opportunity and not let it go to waste. Vaccinate your pets, and in doing so, play your part in eliminating canine rabies in South Africa and the world by 2030.

Afrivet, too, is doing its bit: In the Eastern Cape, one of the constraints to their Veterinary Services providing rural vaccination campaigns was transport. Afrivet came to the rescue by supplying Veterinary Services with a brand-new double cab bakkie to alleviate this constraint. We must all play our part.

(830 words)

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