In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from
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REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
to the
FIRST WORLD RABIES DAY
8 September 2007

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the authorities of all the countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region that are celebrating the inaugural World Rabies Day on 8 September 2007. This is a new international event launching global efforts to eliminate rabies and we hope that it will be marked every year from now on. The purpose of this event is to remind people that rabies is still a very deadly but preventable disease.

The Alliance for Rabies Control (ARC) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have coordinated the event, which has attracted support from other organizations such as WHO, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Veterinary Association. It is being conducted in partnership with many international health organizations, national, state and local public health partners, professional organizations, and commercial pharmaceutical companies.

The goal is to engage at least 55 000 people around the world to take action on this day - one person participating for every human victim of rabies who has died in the
past year. We already know that the event has far succeeded that initial goal. This is a day to inform and educate people about the reality of rabies. The objectives of World Rabies Day are:

- To improve global awareness of rabies and its prevention;
- To promote prevention at the community level, including the formulation and support of educational initiatives about rabies prevention and responsible pet ownership;
- To work towards the coordination of global veterinary and medical resources in a ‘One Medicine’ approach to fight rabies.

As you are all aware, rabies is a neglected, under-reported zoonotic disease. It kills 50 000 to 60 000 people each year around the globe, including an estimated 5000 people in our region. These statistics are considered an underestimate as rabies is often not reportable where the majority of human deaths occur. Between 30% and 50% of these deaths occur in children below 15 years of age as a result of bites from rabid dogs.

All of these deaths could be prevented through prompt and proper wound care and administration of post-exposure prophylaxis, vaccine and rabies immunoglobulin, according to WHO guidelines. But, many of these untreated exposures could be prevented completely through comprehensive and coordinated rabies vaccination of dog populations. This approach will result in local elimination of dog-associated strains of rabies viruses, especially if coupled with population management and novel approaches for hard-to-reach animals. When rabies is eliminated in its main animal reservoirs, human exposures decline precipitously.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dog rabies elimination is a cost-effective intervention, when compared to the cost of post-bite treatment in humans. The latter is about 20 to 100 more costly than the vaccination of a dog. Accordingly, WHO strongly recommends that governments should consider investing in dog rabies elimination as the best way to reduce the escalating costs of post-exposure prophylaxis and prevent unnecessary deaths.
We recognize that, in practice, this is a challenging issue in the countries in our region and that it raises many unsolved issues.

For example, are the veterinary services in our countries capable of ensuring sustained regular and sufficient coverage of dog and wild canid populations by rabies vaccination campaigns when they are overloaded by the burden of tackling many other zoonoses affecting food animals of greater economic importance? Which sector should provide the financial resources to cover the control of the disease at its animal source in order to prevent a disease in humans?

In fact, mechanisms between the various sectors involved, particularly health and agriculture, need to be established, for a fair distribution of the costs and benefits of dog rabies elimination. Innovative operational research is also needed to develop community-based delivery systems of dog vaccine, under the supervision of veterinary services, to ensure expanded coverage at lower cost.

During this day, we would like to encourage all of you to mobilize towards developing collaborative initiatives to control and prevent this fatal disease. Several hundred thousand individuals are reported bitten by animals every year in the Region, with proven animal and human rabies cases reported from 16 out of the 23 countries. The presence of a wild reservoir in wolves, jackals and foxes in the eastern part of the Region constitutes an additional challenge that makes rabies more difficult and more costly to control.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge with appreciation the efforts undertaken by all the stakeholders participating in the implementation of the rabies control programmes in the countries, and particularly the WHO collaborating centres in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Tunisia for their contribution in the quality control of vaccines, in capacity-building and training in the Region, and in developing research programmes on the Region’s priorities.

I wish a very successful celebration of this first World Rabies Day in all the countries of the Region.