

EDITORIAL

Effect of COVID 19 Pandemic and lock-down on animal bite and rabies



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Essential health services had been disrupted across the globe by the COVID-19 pandemic; consequent lock-down and restriction measures implemented by various Governments to curb its transmission. This exacerbated inequalities in access to health care and consequent high burden of preventable diseases.

Rabies, is one such vaccine preventable neglected tropical disease, still claims an estimated 35,000–60,000 human lives annually. During COVID times animal bite victims also faced much difficulty in travelling to ARC due to lack of transport services, financial constrains due to job loss in lock-down, also fear of contracting COVID-19 caused most people to avoid big hospitals. They either didn't seek care at all or, ended up in smaller clinics nearby that were either closed due to lack of health man-power or, without stock due to vaccine shortage which ultimately raised challenges in availing proper post-exposure prophylaxis.

On the contrary, 'stay home, stay safe' and 'work from home' policy adopted during lock-down or restriction measures might have some beneficial effects resulting in less number of animal bite incidences.

The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had declared Rabies a notifiable disease on the eve of 'World Rabies Day' observed on September 28, 2021. In order to establish a strong surveillance system for more accurate evaluation of rabies burden and facilitate the development of strategies as per regional conditions to achieve the Global target for Rabies elimination i.e. achieving 'Zero Human Rabies death by 2030'.

India has launched its' new 'National Action Plan for dog Mediated Rabies Elimination' (NAPRE) by 2030. Investment in rabies elimination will strengthen both human and veterinary health systems, ensure equity, and improve quality and access to anti-rabies care leading to sustainable development.

Newer human rabies virus-neutralizing monoclonal antibodies as cocktail for post-exposure prophylaxis of rabies are available now.

The key elements of the global rabies elimination strategy are increased mass dog vaccination, improved access to human rabies vaccines and community engagement through mass awareness programme; but these services are currently not enough. Several countries had reduced human rabies vaccine procurement in 2020 and 2021, financial resources allocated to rabies control programme were reduced in 60% of countries during COVID-19. We have seen fifteen human rabies deaths in last one year (2021) at our hospital.

Human rabies deaths are entirely preventable through prompt, complete and timely post-exposure prophylaxis. As 99% of rabies cases are dog-mediated, rabid animals should be put in isolation, identification of any other sick animal in locality should also be done besides strengthening mass canine vaccination.

Efforts should be directed to bridge the gaps in knowledge of animal bite management at all levels through training programme and awareness campaign besides improving access to adequate quality care for animal bite victims and rabies patients in the post-pandemic period in order to achieve the goal of Rabies Free World.

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