CANINE ABC PROGRAMME: THE NECESSITY OF IT AND WHAT HAS TO BE DONE
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10 The percentage of stray dogs that have to be vaccinated to end the incidence of rabies. (check)
11 This is really a “guesstimate” based on assumptions. No physical survey has been conducted.
12 Krishna, Dr. Chinny, op.cit.
13 Times News Service, “Zero-rabies city shows the way to small towns: Over80% of the dogs in Chennai have been sterilized: Corpn”. The Times of India, Chennai edition, June 10, 2009.
15 Ibid, p.78.
17 WHO Technical Report Series 931, p.34.
18 WHO, Guidelines for Dog Population Management, p.7. See the part about Nepal and feral dog colony in the Nile delta islands.
19 Ibid, p. 29.

AWBI provides financial aid for implementation of ABC programme in the country. For details, application forms & scheme guidelines, Please visit AWBI’s website - www.awbi.org.
AWBI has also brought out a manual entitled “Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Sterilisation of Stray Dogs under the Animal Birth Control Programme”, which can be obtained on payment of Rs. 100/- from the Board.

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governments have an important role to play in providing funds and infrastructure and training, NGOs involved in the implementation of the ABC programme have to extend their own reach, enhance their own capacities and, especially, play a key role in raising public awareness about the importance of the programme and enlisting community support for it.

Community support is particularly important given the need to annually revaccinate sterilized dogs against rabies. The problem is catching them. As the Guidelines point out, “In general there are very few areas where dogs have no referral household and no attachment to at least one person, but the level of supervision may be very variable…”. In India, there are many organisations and people who feed and take care of neighbourhood stray dogs. Their help should be enlisted in revaccination drives and, where necessary, Resident Welfare Associations and other similar bodies should help them to extend their activities.

Endnotes

3 Ibid, p.74.
7 Reece, J.F. op.cit, p.59.
The Animal Welfare Board of India (henceforth AWBI) has taken up the implementation of the animal birth control (henceforth ABC) programme for canines on a national scale with two objectives—to end the presence of stray dogs on roads and public spaces and free India from the incidence of rabies by 2020. Under this programme, stray dogs are picked up, neutered, vaccinated against rabies and released in the respective areas from where they had been captured.

The ABC programme constitutes the only effective and humane method of controlling stray dog populations. In its report, Technical Report Series 931, WHO’s Expert Consultation on Rabies, which met in Geneva from 5 to 8 October 2004, states:

“Since the 1960s, ABC programmes coupled with rabies vaccination have been advocated as a method to control urban street male and female dog populations and ultimately human rabies in Asia. The rationale is to reduce the dog population turnover as well as the number of dogs susceptible to rabies and limit aspects of male dog behaviour (such as dispersal and fighting) that facilitate the spread of rabies. The culling of dogs during these programmes may be counterproductive as sterilized, vaccinated dogs may be destroyed”.

The killing of stray dogs, which many municipal bodies advocate, serves no purpose. Dr K. Bogel, Chief Veterinary, Public Health, Division of Communicable diseases, World Health

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1. 12,794 persons respectively between April 2003 and March 2004. Between April 2004 and March 2005, pet and stray dogs bit 16,220 and 16,747 persons respectively. The figures for the two categories were 12,294 and 15,363 in 2005-06 and 7,147 and 10,651 in 2006-07.

A report from Pune states that the number of dog bite cases reported at Sassoon Hospital rose from 5,600 to an alarming 8,751 in 2002. It adds, “Till May 2003, the hospital had a total of 3,815 dog-bite patients. However, according to the hospital medical officer, Namdeo Patil, 70 per cent of dog bite cases were from pet dogs”. 10.

Miles to go

Clearly, a great deal has to be done to ensure that those keeping pet dogs look after them properly, which includes treating them with affection, feeding them adequately, not driving them to debility and death through excessive breeding, and taking care of their medical and other needs. Similarly, a great deal has to be done in regard to the implementation of the ABC programme. The WHO and the WSPA announced the Guidelines as early as May 1990. While the ABC programme was introduced on a local basis in cities like Delhi in 1993, Jaipur in 1994, Chennai in 1996, Mumbai in 1999 and Bangalore in 2000, there was nothing approaching a national policy to implement it until as late as 2001. It was in the December of that year that the Government of India put in place a mandatory legal basis for it by promulgating the Animal Birth Control (Dog) Rules.

Unfortunately, progress on the ground has been slow. As things are now, the programme is being implemented only in the metropolitan cities, and that too not on an adequate scale. Funds, infrastructural inadequacies, including the lack of a sufficient number of trained surgeons, are important constraints. So is lack of public awareness. While the union and state
Organization (WHO), Switzerland, and John Hoyt, then President, World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), as well as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), made this clear in their joint preface to the Guidelines for Dog Population Management (Henceforth Guidelines), released by the WHO and WSPA in May 1990. They stated,

“All too often, authorities confronted by problems caused by these [stray] dogs have turned to mass destruction in the hope of finding a quick solution, only to find that the destruction had to continue, year after year, with no end in sight” 2.

According to the Guidelines, killing was practised in the past to a large extent “simply because knowledge of the composition and dynamics of dog populations” as well as “crucial data on the density, composition and turnover of dog population” were lacking”. The Guidelines add, “Removal and killing of dogs should never be considered as the most effective way of dealing with the problem of surplus dogs in the community: it has no effect on the root cause of the problem, which is overproduction of dogs” 3.

In its Eighth Report, (WHO Technical Report Series 824), the WHO’s Expert Committee on Rabies, which met in Geneva from 24 to 30 September 1991, had stated:

“The committee expressed its appreciation of the long-term engagement of the WHO in developing methodologies related to dog ecology and dog population management. Considerable experience has been gained in projects coordinated by the WHO in Ecuador, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Tunisia and other ecological studies conducted in South America and Asia. However, data collection, health systems and operational research need to be continued in other areas and countries with different social and ecological conditions.

Three practical methods

Bangalore’s example once again underlines the fact that the ABC programme has produced results wherever it has been seriously implemented, notwithstanding the fact that the environmental factors have been invariably adverse. The importance of this becomes clear on recalling that WHO’s Technical Report Series 931 identifies three practical methods of dog population management as “movement restriction, habitat control and reproduction control” 17. Movement restriction, according to the Guidelines, involves the prevention of restricted or supervised dogs or pet family dogs, from cutting loose to either mate and return or merge into the stray dog population 18.

As for habitat control, we have seen that, according to the Guidelines, the carrying capacity of each habitat for each species is determined by the “availability, distribution and the quality of resources (shelter, food, water) for the species concerned”. Effective removal of garbage would eliminate an important source of food for stray dogs. The Guidelines recommend fencing of dumps and enforcement of garbage disposal regulations in locations like markets, dumps and camping grounds where waste and garbage are concentrated. These also recommend organisation of garbage disposal, education of people and enforcement of regulations where the presence of waste material and garbage is widespread over the entire human habitation area. Reproduction control can only be achieved through a systematic and sustained implementation of the ABC programme.

Garbage disposal in most Indian cities is hardly efficient. Besides, many families neglect their pet dogs. They often escape into the streets and impregnate stray bitches whose puppies add to the stray dog population. They also account for a substantial percentage of instances of dogs biting humans. For example, according to information provided by BBMP in response to an application by Gopi Shankar under the RTI Act (RIA/PR/27/c/07-08 dated 30-04-07) pet and stray dogs bit
Bangalore Mahanagara Palike or Bangalore Municipal Corporation (BMP)—which became Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) on February 1, 2007, following the incorporation of several peripheral areas into its territory. The figure came down to 11 in 2001, two in 2002 and three in 2003. There was not a single human death from rabies in the financial years 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07 (up to February 28). This led to a marked fall in the consumption of anti-rabies vaccines for humans in Bangalore. According to a report by Sahana Charan and Afshan Yasmeen in the Bangalore edition of The Hindu of March 11, 2007 only 1980 cases of dog bites were reported in January and 942 in February within the city limits while medical experts put the number at 6,000 every month in the city. They quoted a doctor at the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike’s referral hospital at Banashankari as saying, “We used up more than 55,000 vials of ARV vaccine from April 2005 to March 2006. But from April 2006 till date, we have used only 30,000 vials. This means that the number of cases [of dog bites] is less this time.”

Even if one questions the actual figures in The Hindu report, there can be no doubt that there had been a substantial decline. According to a reply to an application by Gopi Shankar under the Right to Information Act (RIA/PR/31/07-08 dated 11/04/07), by Chief Health Officer BBMP, the annual expenditure on anti-rabies vaccines declined from Rs. 116,57,660 in 2005-06 to Rs. 77,84,347 in 2006-07. The decline works out at Rs. 38,73,313, which is substantial. The reply shows a mark decline in the use of human anti-rabies vaccine too.

The number of vials used was 50,590 in 2005-06 when Rabipur was used and 35,640 in 2006-07 Verorab was used. The decline in consumption in 2006-07 appears even more impressive if one considers that 67,759 (7,480 and 60,279) vials were used in 2004-05 when Abhayrab and Rabipur were used.

“On the basis of the results obtained so far in these studies, the committee recommended drastic changes in rabies control policies as compared to those previously adopted and practised by most national authorities and communities. There is no evidence that the removal of dogs has ever had a significant impact on dog population densities and the spread of rabies. The population turnover of dogs may be so high that even the highest recorded removal rates [about 15 per cent of the dog population] are easily compensated by survival rates. In addition, dog removal may be unacceptable to local communities. Therefore, this approach should not be used in large-scale control programmes unless ecological and sociological studies show it is feasible”.

Several studies on the ground by eminent veterinary practitioners and surgeons have underscored the futility of killing. Dr. J.F. Reece writes in “Dogs and Dog Control in Developing Countries”. In Delhi, a concerted effort at dog removal killed a third of the straying dogs with no reduction in dog population. It has been the same experience elsewhere in India. In his paper, “ABC responsible for decline in human rabies cases”, Dr. Chinny Krishna, co-founder and chairman of the Blue Cross Society of India at the time of writing, cites the instance of the Madras Corporation’s catch and kill programme that began in 1860. He quotes Dr. Theodore Bhaskaran, a former Post Master General of Madras, as stating in an article, “In the 1970s, the number of stray dogs destroyed by the corporation was so high that the Central Leather Institute, Madras, designed products—such as neckties and wallets—from dog skins”. Dr. Krishna has pointed out elsewhere that the number of dogs killed by the Corporation had gone up to 30,000 per year by 1995. Yet the city’s stray dog population and the incidence of human rabies continued to rise.
The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (M.C.G.M.) killed 4,49,568 stray dogs in the period between 1984 and 1994, in a bid to bring down the city's stray dog population, and thereby control what it called "dog nuisance." Yet, neither this nor expenditure of Rs 1,67,65,497 on mass killing of dogs, led to any reduction in the incidence of human deaths from rabies in Mumbai, which averaged at around 50 per year. Nor was there any decline in the population of stray dogs. Hence, on March 25, 1994, the M.C.G.M, without any direction from any court, issued a circular recording its decision to stop mass killing of stray dogs, because "... in spite of killing so many dogs every year, we have not been able to bring down their population in Greater Bombay. This is because of their very high birth rate."

It has been the same experience throughout the world. Dr. Reece writes:

"In Hongkong approximately 20,000 dogs were killed by the Government and another 13,000 by welfare organisations every year... with little impact on the free-roaming dog population. In Ecuador, the elimination of 12-25 per cent of the dog population every year for five years did not reduce the dog population (WHO 1988). In rural Australia, a 76 per cent reduction in the free roaming rural dog population failed to drastically reduce their population, and the number of free-roaming dogs returned to their pre-cull level within a year (Beck 2005). In Kathmandu, street dogs have been poisoned for at least 50 years with little long-term effect on their population."  

**Why killing does not help**

It is not difficult to understand why killing does not help in reducing stray-dog populations. The *Guidelines* clearly state:

community participation and strong media support. Three committees (national, sub-regional and local) have been established to deal with technical and logistical aspects of the campaigns. The success and the sustainability of these campaigns in Latin America have been due to political commitment, acquisition and supply of canine vaccines by ministries of health, free delivery of these vaccines, local level commitment in the planning and execution of the campaigns and the effective coordination and supervision of these campaigns by the health services.”

**Declining incidence of rabies**

If Latin America can vaccinate approximately 45 million dogs a year, there is no reason why India cannot vaccinate 70 per cent of its stray dog population estimated (!) at between 22 and 25 million. In India, the incidence of rabies has declined sharply wherever the ABC programme has been seriously implemented. Dr Chinny Krishna points out that the incidence of rabies in Chennai declined from 120 in 1996, the year in which the programme was launched in the city, to five in 2003.

A report in the Chennai edition of *The Times of India* of June 10, 2009, records further improvement. According to it, there was no human deaths from rabies in the last one year. The report quotes the Chennai Corporation’s Health Officer, Dr.B. Kuganantham as saying, “There has been no case of rabies in the last one year. Complaints of stray dogs have come down drastically.”

In Jaipur’s walled city, the number declined from 10 in 1994, the year the ABC programme was started as a pilot project, to nil in 2001 and 2002 respectively. In 2000, when the ABC programme was launched in Bangalore, the number of human deaths from rabies was 20 in the 100 wards of the
killing of a Brahmin was perhaps the most dastardly crime possible!

The dog then transformed itself into Dharma, the God of Virtue, who said he was following the Pandavas in the form of the dog and this was his last test for Yudhishthira, who would not have been allowed into heaven if he had agreed to abandon a faithful companion who had followed him all the way.

In Krittibas Ojha’s Bengali rendering of the Ramayana, Ram not only gave a hearing to a stray dog that had complained of having been hit with a stick by a Sanyasin but, at the instance of his courtiers, administered to the latter the punishment the dog had prescribed. As the punishment—the crowning of the Sanyasin as the king of Kalinjar—stunned the courtiers, the dog explained that, under a curse by Lord Shiva, every king of Kalinjar was reborn as a dog!

Clearly, the presence of stray dogs, which is as old as the epics, cannot be ended in a day! While the effect of a sustained, area-wise implementation of the ABC programme takes time to be felt in terms of a reduction in the population of stray dogs, one can see it in the form of a decline in the number of human rabies cases. This is because neutering is accompanied by vaccination of stray dogs against rabies. Significantly, WHO’s Technical Report Series 931, points out:

“Mass canine vaccination campaigns have been the most effective measures for controlling canine rabies. Since the 1980s, national mass canine vaccination campaigns have been conducted generally on an annual basis in Latin America, with high coverage (around 80%) in a short period of time (no more than one week). Over the region, approximately 45 million dogs a year have been vaccinated, resulting in a significant decline in canine and human rabies. The organisation of the campaign is based on inter-sectoral collaboration,

“Each habitat has a specific carrying capacity for each species. This specific carrying capacity essentially depends on the availability, quality and distribution of the resources (shelter, food, water) for the species concerned. The density of population for higher vertebrates (including dogs) is almost always near the carrying capacity of the environment. Any reduction in the population density through additional mortality is rapidly compensated by better reproduction and survival. In other words, when dogs are removed, the survivors’ life expectancy increases because they have better access to resources”

The argument that such a situation will not arise if all stray dogs in a city or State or country are killed at one go holds little water. For one thing, nowhere has such a venture succeeded. For another, with all dogs killed, dogs from other areas will move in. For dogs are territorial. Those living in one area will not allow dogs from other areas to come in. That is why one notices that each area has its own resident stray canines with very rare additions to their ranks. With sterilized and vaccinated dogs returned to their areas keeping unsterilized and unvaccinated dogs out, the authorities implementing the ABC programme can progressively move into other areas leaving each of the earlier ones to be guarded by sterilized and vaccinated dogs. Proceeding area by area they can cover an entire city or country within a pre-fixed period—returning only occasionally to areas already covered to take care of sundry unsterilized and unvaccinated dogs that might have sneaked in.

If strays from an area, say A, are killed or relocated—released in another area or put in dog pounds—stray dogs from other areas will take their place. Those conducting the ABC programme will then have to return to A, where the
newcomers, with no other takers for the resources of the area, will have proliferated rapidly, and begin neutering all over again. Indeed, the experience of A will be repeated in all other areas and the exercise of sterilising and vaccinating stray dogs will have to be carried on indefinitely with no end in sight.

**Why back in the same area?**

No ABC programme can succeed if neutered and vaccinated dogs are not released in the places from which they had been picked up. There is also another aspect. Stray dogs that are familiar with their surroundings, know who is a friend and who is not, what spells danger, the places where food and shelter are available, and have referral households that support them. They are at peace with their environment. In contrast, stray dogs moving into a new area are often aggressive because they are under attack from local dogs, cannot distinguish between friend and foe, do not know where they can find food and shelter and are hence always on the edge.

Besides, the ABC programme itself lowers the aggression level in dogs and bitches. Since sterilized bitches do not come on heat, fights among dogs over bitches, which raise their aggression levels, do not occur during mating seasons when they are most frequent. This drastically reduces the number of instances in which a higher level of aggression leads to a greater intolerance of provocation and biting of people. Also, since sterilized bitches do not litter, one does not witness the rise in their aggression level that occurs when they are guarding their puppies against threats—which are many, given the way in which humans treat animals. Significantly, many get bitten when stray dogs are provoked by people teasing and hitting them or trying to take away their puppies.

**Gradual decline**

Most people who oppose the ABC programme do not know the rationale behind it or the way it works. They feel it is futile because sterilized and vaccinated dogs are back in their localities. There is decline but it occurs gradually as sterilized dogs live out their biological spans of life. It is relevant here to look at the experience of Jaipur where the ABC programme, started as a pilot project in 1994 by an NGO, Help in Suffering, was expanded to cover the entire city in 1996. According to Dr. J.F. Reece and Dr. S.K. Chawla, "During the eight-year study period [1994 to 2002] a decline in the neighbourhood [read stray] dog population of 28 per cent was recorded between the peak and the last survey—an annual average of 3.5 per cent".

One needs to explain to people the inevitability of the slow decline in numbers and the critical importance of having these dogs back, and the fact that no instant solution can be found for issues that have been with societies for centuries. Over sixty years after Independence from British rule poverty still stalks India despite the massive development efforts that have been undertaken. Stray dogs have existed in India ever since once can remember. The great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata mention them.

In the Mahabharata, a little brown dog appeared from nowhere and began following the five Pandavas as they set forth from their capital of Hastinapur in their last journey along with their common wife, Draupadi. The latter and four Pandavas fell dead as they climbed the slopes of Mount Meru on their way to heaven. Yudhishthira alone continued walking, followed by the dog. Suddenly, Indra, the king of Gods, arrived in his flying chariot and told Yudhishthira that his exemplary life had earned him the honour of entering heaven in his mortal body and he had come to take him. Yudhishthira refused to go without the dog. Not only that, he said that abandoning the dog, which had followed him all the way, and which would die without him, would be a sin worse than that of killing a Brahmin. This particularly needs to be noted because, in that age, the