

Letter to the Editor

Stray dog bite menace: an open invitation to rabies in Shimla city, Himachal Pradesh, India

Sir,

Shimla is the capital city of Himachal Pradesh. Shimla acts as a hub for India's tourism sector. It is among the top 10 preferred entrepreneurial locations in India.¹ City is grappling with the problem of stray dog menace. Stray dogs have established their habitats around the restaurants, hotels, hostels, hospitals and clubs here. There are around 3500-4000 stray dogs in Shimla City. In localities like the Mall Road, the Ridge, Jakhu and Summer Hill etc. the free roaming dogs are seen barking on the people.

Unprovoked attacks by aggressive stray dogs have become a menace plaguing the city. Around 4-5 dog bite cases are being reported daily and more than 1000 dog bite cases annually in the city.² Dogs fight for food and habitat and due to irresponsible ownership pet dogs also come in contact with stray dogs. As per corporation health officer 4 to 5 dead animals in municipal area which were sent for the confirmation of rabies to CRI Kasauli were positive for the rabies. This shows that rabies virus is circulating among stray dogs of the city.

As per appeals filed by the people of Shimla, Himachal Pradesh High Court has recently directed the Municipal Corporation to make Shimla free of stray Dogs.³ The dog bitten cases are in physical and mental trauma. Dog bites cause multiple infections at the wound site but the 100% fatal disease which is caused by the dog bites is rabies. This fatal infection is 100% preventable with immediate wound washing and complete post exposure prophylaxis.⁴ It is a matter of primary health care and the situation qualify for free treatment under the public health commitment but free ARVs and Immunoglobulin is only provided at one public health institution in the city during routine working hours i.e. DDU hospital Shimla and is not provided at any other primary health care institutions in the city. If there is no availability in the government health institutions, in that situation cases have to pay out of pocket and have to purchase the vaccine from private local chemist. Dog bite cases with bleeding are referred after the wound care because the Rabies immunoglobulin are not easily available and if it is procured the staff show incompetency to inoculate it.

In 2006, the corporation had set up a stray dog birth control society in Shimla.⁵ Till March 2011, over 5,800 dogs; almost 80 percent of their total population was sterilized.² After that sterilization program remained

suspended for over two years and has again been started from June 2014 this year. The sterilization and vaccination of stray dogs is not target oriented. The reason for this is the financial crisis and lack of manpower as told by veterinary public health officer.

Stray dogs are attracted by the Edible waste. Therefore, dogs do cluster around eating joints in the city. Door to door collection of garbage campaign is in operation since 2009 by the Municipal Corporation.⁶ Beside this people break the chain of the garbage disposal. Edible waste is found outside the hostels, restaurants, and clubs because dogs have an easy access of food in these places. People put the edible waste outside the door of their houses early in the morning, so the stray dogs are found in these places. Stray dogs enter in Shimla city from the adjacent villages as it is an easily accessible source of food. People have habit to feed the stray dogs and this can also be seen on the Ridge, Mall and temples. By feeding the dog's people think they are correcting their past sins. There is no strict law enforcement and political commitment seen to prevent this littering.

The main reason for the increase in the stray dogs is edible waste.⁷ Secondly the sterilization and vaccination program is very slow and aimless. Thirdly the entry of stray dogs from the adjacent villages is not restricted. Enforcement of the law for edible waste management should be implemented robustly. Stray dogs those are once sterilized and vaccinated should be vaccinated there after every three years further to complete the prophylaxis for prevention of rabies.⁸ There should be auction of the stray dogs after sterilization and vaccination in order to convert them into pet dogs. Restriction of the stray dogs to enter in municipal corporation area is required. IEC activities for prevention and control of rabies should be in place for the people.⁹ At last strong political commitment must be there to make Shimla city free of Stray dogs.

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