

WHO to fast-track efforts to eliminate rabies

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The World Health Organization (WHO) recently called upon Member States and partners to accelerate efforts to end rabies which causes 59 000 agonizing and painful deaths globally every year, one person every nine minute, mostly children and the poor.

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"Human rabies is caused mostly by dogs and can be eliminated by increasing awareness about the disease, vaccinating dogs and most importantly by making the already available life-saving rabies vaccines, medicines, tools and technologies affordable and available to all. We can, and must break the disease cycle and save lives," Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia, told the global meeting 'Driving progress towards rabies elimination' here.

At the meeting, the global rabies partners comprising of WHO, OIE, FAO and UNICEF and rabies endemic countries from Asia-Pacific and Africa, shared and deliberated on measures to fast-track elimination of dog transmitted rabies by 2030.

Countries from Africa and Asia, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Kenya, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, who have assessed access, delivery and distribution of rabies post-exposure prophylaxis, shared outcomes of their studies. These studies were conducted with WHO support to enable GAVI take an informed decision to support rabies vaccines. The rabies endemic countries are seeking GAVI support to improve affordability and access to rabies vaccines for vulnerable populations, of which many are children.

WHO has been advocating for a shift from intramuscular to intradermal rabies vaccination, which is not only 60 to 80 per cent cheaper, but is of shorter treatment regimen of just one week. Most countries in WHO South-East Asia Region are now using intradermal route for anti-rabies vaccines.

At the meeting, Member countries shared initiatives being rolled out as part of the new 'Zero by 30: The Strategic Plan', to be launched by WHO and partners to end dog transmitted rabies. The plan centers on One Health approach and addresses the disease in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner. It aims at preventing and responding to dog-transmitted rabies by improving awareness and education, reducing human rabies risk through expanded dog vaccinations, and improving access to healthcare, medicines and vaccines for populations at risk. The plan calls for generating and measuring impact by implementing proven effective guidelines for rabies control, and encouraging the use of innovative surveillance technologies to monitor progress towards "Zero by 30". It also aims at continued stakeholder engagement at all levels to sustain financing for achieving "Zero by 30".

Investing in rabies control and elimination improves equity and access to healthcare and contributes to sustainable development.