

Dog Population and Rabies Control in India

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Since the middle of the 19th century, under British rule, there have been organized efforts to reduce the dog population in towns and cities. The stated aim of this was to control the spread of rabies by controlling the number of dogs.

To this end, the municipalities in India used to catch and kill dogs in public places using a variety of barbaric methods – clubbing, shooting, drowning, poisoning with strychnine and cyanide, or by electrocution. The last method was introduced in the mid-1930s and continued in many cities till the end of the 20th century and beyond.

If this killing was to control the incidence of rabies or the number of dogs on the streets, the programmes uniformly failed in every town and city where they were carried out. Official records show that in each succeeding year more and more dogs were being killed, yet the number of human rabies deaths kept going up.

After studying this issue in the early sixties, the Blue Cross of India felt that if a course of action followed for over 100 years had failed to achieve its objective, the basic reasoning for the action was obviously flawed. In 1964, the Blue Cross proposed that the answer to this issue was for a mass spay-vaccinate-and-return programme. This would ensure that there were no more new births from the operated animals and that, since they were vaccinated, the spread of rabies would also be controlled. The programme was named the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme to show that the control of the dog population was as simple as ABC!

It took the Blue Cross of India over 30 years to get the Chennai Municipality to stop the killing in 1996. By this time the number of dogs killed each day in Chennai was as many as 135 and the number of reported deaths from rabies was 120 in 1996.

Within one year of replacing the brutal catch-and-kill programme with a spay-vaccinate-and-return alternative, the number of human deaths from rabies began to drop. By the year 2000, results were so encouraging that the Government of India adopted Animal Birth Control as the official programme of the Government and India became the first no-kill country in the world.

The results of the WHO-sponsored study of rabies in India covering the ten-year period from 1993 to 2002 were published in 2004. Its major findings were that the number of deaths from rabies in India had been more or less steady at about 17,500 per year over this period. Yet wherever ABC was being implemented, the incidence of rabies showed a drop.

Today Chennai is the first zero-rabies metropolis in the country. Other towns and cities where ABC is being carried out with rigour have shown similar results. Dog populations have also fallen significantly.