

Letter to the Editor

Increasing number of stray dogs- awaited human rabies disaster in Chamba town of Himachal Pradesh

Sir,

Chamba is an ancient small town of Himachal Pradesh. The town is located at an altitude of 996 metres (3,268 ft) on the bank of the Ravi River. The population town is 19930 [Census 2011]. Since it is headquarter of district, the offices of various departments are situated here. There are large numbers of temples, palaces and because of its scenic beauty there is continuous visit of tourists to this place. All these conditions lead to heavy crowd of people in the town round the year.

Recently it has observed that beautiful town is becoming heaven. The tourists and other guests of town are being welcomed here by stray dogs. Due to overcrowding in town there is release of garbage and other waste in the town every day. There is poor garbage disposal system in town as there is unavailability of required number of garbage bins, garbage carrying vehicles and required number of workers. The bins which are installed are broken and have very pathetic look. In some places dogs, cats, monkeys and goats are seen together feeding in the same garbage bin. The campaign of door to door collection of garbage which was started in 15th June 2015 by the Municipal Committee in the town has almost stopped now. The garbage and other wastes are seen in every corner of the town. Since packs of the stray dogs naturally get attracted to garbage dumped in front of the restaurants, hotels, dhabhas, rehdis and open blocked drains, number of stray dogs and number of dog bite cases has also been increased.

India has more than 30 million stray dogs.¹ There are approximately 17.4 million animal bites annually in India.² There are 142 stray dogs in record but number is much more as community dogs are not counted. The total numbers of cases reported in the year 2017 were 1974 from the town as per the secondary data obtained from Medical College Chamba (HP). The number may be much more as some might not have come for the treatment, while others might have gone to private practitioners and traditional healers. The dog bites not only cause physical injury but also severe mental trauma. The most fatal disease which occurs due to dog bite is Rabies which is 100 percent fatal. Rabies is an acute viral disease of nervous system that is caused by a Rhabdovirus, usually transmitted by the bite of rabid animal to humans and other animals. It is characterized typically by increased salivation, abnormal behaviour, and eventual paralysis and death when untreated.³ Despite this, an estimated 59

000 people die from rabies across the world each year, with around 90% of these deaths occurring among children living in rural areas in Africa and Asia. In India alone, estimates range between 18 000 to 20 000 human deaths from rabies each year.⁴ The deaths may be much more because there is no post-mortem laboratory diagnosis and patients are diagnosed clinically so many patients are left especially of dumb rabies. Stray dogs are responsible for about 97% of human rabies death in India.⁵ There is linkage of stray dogs and rabies transmission. The large unmanaged dog populations can be daunting to rabies control program planners.

It requires immediate post exposure prophylaxis which includes washing the site of bite, administration of rabies immunoglobulin (RI) and anti-rabies vaccine (ARV).⁶ ARV and RI is free in state but increased number of dog bite cases force the government to purchase and stock more vaccines and drugs for preventing and treating the bite and its related diseases, which can subsequently increase the expense of the Government.

Dog population management is directly related to decrease the incidence of dog bite cases and ultimately the transmission of Rabies. However citizens of Chamba must remember that stray dog menace cannot be prevented without the garbage/waste management. Stopping the habit of throwing away the garbage bags on streets is the first step to be taken to check the stray dog menace. Stray dogs are found there, where chances for them to get food. In countries where garbage is kept in bins and cleaned regularly, stray dogs cannot survive on the streets.

Civil administration should pass strict orders to the owners of restaurants, hotels, bakeries, and fast food corners and chat stalls to check the open dumping of food wastes, as such spots turn out to be the direct feeding places for dogs. Many people have the habit of feeding the dogs due to many reasons for example some think that if they feed the dogs they will get rid from past sins etc, so a separate shelter house for stray dogs should be made in the town where people can feed dogs. ABC-AR (Animal birth control anti rabies) programme under Animal Birth Control (2001) Dog Rule was started by Government of India in 2001.⁷ Under this programme the stray dogs are captured sterilised and vaccinated and left in the place from where they had been captured. It was started in Chamba town in 2015. Two rounds of

vaccination and sterilisation were done till date but programme could not sustain due to lack of resources.

The programme should be restarted to decrease the population of stray dogs. Health, Education and Panchayati Raj institutions should observe the World Rabies day every year. This can be a good platform to aware all sections of community about prevention and control of Rabies.

If the situation of stray dog menace is not controlled at the earliest the disaster of human rabies may happen in this beautiful town. So responsible waste management with strict implementation of ABC-AR programme can decrease the number of dog bites and ultimately prevent from the fatal disease "RABIES".

Arvind Kumar Dhiman*, Pragya Dixit

Department of Community Medicine, Pt Jawahar Lal
Nehru Medical College Chamba, Himachal Pradesh,
India

***Correspondence to**

Dr. Arvind Kumar Dhiman,
E-mail: dr.arvinddhiman77@gmail.com

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