

From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride



Department of

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

AN ROINN

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agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

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HSS(MD)46/2008

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Your Ref:

Our Ref: HSS(MD)46/2008

Date: 23 December 2008

Dear Colleague

CONFIRMED CASE OF IMPORTED RABIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The purpose of this letter is to update you on my previous communication on this issue - <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hss-md-42-2008.pdf>. A patient with confirmed rabies infection is currently being managed in the intensive care unit of the Belfast Trust. The diagnosis was confirmed by tests on samples sent to the United Kingdom National Reference Laboratory for Rabies at the Veterinary Laboratory Agency, Weybridge, Surrey.

The case had worked as a volunteer with animals in South Africa for short periods during the past two years, and had close contact with various animals including dogs. Rabies is endemic in South Africa where bites from infected dogs are the main source of rabies in humans. An estimated 55,000 human cases of classical rabies occur worldwide each year, however, there has never been a virologically confirmed case of natural human to human transmission of rabies, although transmission via transplantation has been described. In the last 10 years there have been three previous cases of imported human rabies in the UK, one each from the Philippines, Nigeria and India. None had received post-exposure prophylactic treatment for rabies either in the country of exposure or on their return to the UK.

Persons reporting a potential exposure to a rabid animal overseas may present to their GP or to an Emergency Department. Following exposure an individual risk assessment should be undertaken to determine the need for post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) with rabies vaccine with or without immunoglobulin. PEP is highly effective in preventing rabies if given promptly. For people who have not received any rabies vaccine prior to a potential exposure, post exposure prophylaxis consists of a dose of vaccine as soon as possible after the bite followed by four further doses 3, 7, 14 and 30 days later. If the person has been previously vaccinated then fewer doses of vaccine are required. Human rabies immunoglobulin may also be given if the exposure is considered high risk.

It is important that people intending to travel to endemic areas are reminded to avoid contact with dogs and wild animals, and that they must take action if an exposure occurs. If they are bitten, scratched, or licked by a warm blooded animal in a rabies-endemic country, they should wash the wound or site of exposure (e.g. mucous membrane) with plenty of soap and water, and seek medical advice without delay, even if they are previously vaccinated. If they do not seek medical treatment while abroad, they should still seek it when they come home, even if this is some time after the exposure event.

Although rabies vaccine is not routinely advised for all travellers, pre-exposure immunisation is recommended for those:

- working abroad (eg veterinary staff or zoologists) who by the nature of their work are at risk of contact with rabid animals.
- living in or travelling for more than one month to rabies-enzootic areas unless there is reliable access to prompt, safe medical care .
- travelling for less than one month to enzootic areas but who may be exposed to rabies because of their travel activities;
- who would have limited access to post-exposure medical care.

In addition, this advice should be specifically brought to the attention of those planning to do voluntary work with animals in rabies-endemic areas.

Further information

1. Further information on rabies prevention for the traveller is available from the National Travel Health Network and Centre at <http://www.nathnac.org/pro/factsheets/rabies.htm>, and specific information about rabies risk for each country can be found on the NaTHNaC Country Information Pages: http://www.nathnac.org/ds/map_world.aspx
2. Immunisation considerations are covered in the rabies chapter of the Green Book (Immunisation against infectious disease), available at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Healthprotection/Immunisation/Greenbook/DH_4097254?IdcService=GET_FILE&dID=115850&Rendition=Web
3. For specific advice regarding the risk assessment of exposed persons, please contact the Public Health Doctor on call at the relevant Health and Social Services Board.

