

**For discussion  
on 31 October 2017**

**LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene  
Subcommittee to Study Issues Relating to Animal Rights**

**Observation of Dogs and Cats on Public Health Grounds**

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper briefs members on the background and cause for keeping dogs and cats for observation on public health grounds.

**BACKGROUND**

*Rabies*

2. Zoonotic diseases that may be spread by animals to humans, including some that may lead to fatalities, have been a major cause of public health concern. Typical examples include avian influenza and rabies which respectively could infect humans through live poultry and pets. The Government has endeavoured to prevent the spreading of such diseases in the community on public health grounds.

3. Rabies is a viral disease of mammals. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), rabies is present in more than 150 countries and territories, and about 59 000 people are estimated to die from rabies every year. Human is usually infected following a bite or scratch from an animal with rabies, as the rabies virus in the saliva of infected animals enters the human body through wounds and travels through nerves to the brain, leading to encephalitis. Transmission to humans by rabid dogs accounts for the majority of cases, and cats and other mammalian animals could also be means of transmission. The incubation period for rabies is typically one to three months but may vary from one week to one year, dependent upon factors such as the location of virus entry and viral load. Hence, infected animals may appear perfectly healthy if the infection is at the early stage. However, once the animal has exhibited clinical signs of infection such as biting and aggression, it may die from the disease in 7 to 10 days.

4. Human and animal rabies cases in Hong Kong have been recorded in 1940s and 1950s. The disease re-emerged in humans and animals in 1980, causing the death of two people and 11 dogs. Sporadic outbreaks of the disease continued to occur in humans and animals in 1980s, with eight cases of human rabies and 34 cases of animal rabies (including two cases in cats and 32 cases in dogs) reported. The last human rabies case occurred in 1981, while the last animal rabies case occurred in 1987.

5. The Government has put in place a successful monitoring and control mechanism. Since 1980s, Hong Kong has no more reported rabies case in either human or animal. The above notwithstanding, we remain vigilant against the risk of rabies as Hong Kong is located in an endemic region of rabies. Hong Kong is also a densely populated metropolis and a free port, with heavy passenger and cargo flows in and out of Hong Kong on a daily basis. According to WHO, over 95% of human deaths from rabies occur in the Asian and African regions. In Asia, only a few other places, such as Japan and Singapore, are free of rabies.

#### Prevention of Rabies

6. For prevention of rabies, several measures are being implemented by the Government, including quarantine control for importation and international transfer of animals; mandatory dog licensing<sup>1</sup> and rabies vaccination regime (such as regular anti-rabies campaigns targeted at vaccinating dogs on fishing vessels and in villages in the New Territories); animal attack case investigations and stray animal management strategies, etc. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) also holds annual exhibition to raise public awareness and understanding of the importance of rabies prevention.

7. As explained in paragraph 3 above, biting and aggression could be clinical signs of rabies infection which may lead to fatality in 7-10 days. It is thus necessary to put animals with such symptoms under observation. The Dogs and Cats Ordinance (Cap.167) was enacted in 1950s to regulate the keeping and control of dogs and cats and to provide for the suppression of rabies and other infection diseases. Section 6(1)(b)(i) and (iii) of the Dogs and Cats Ordinance respectively empowers authorised officers to seize, remove and detain “*any dog or cat which he has reasonable cause to believe to be suffering from any infectious disease*” and “*any dog which he has reasonable cause to believe has inflicted any bite or attack on any*

---

<sup>1</sup> Under the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A), all dogs over the age of five months old kept by any person were required to be vaccinated against rabies, microchipped and licensed.

*person, whether in a public place or not*". In response to the rabies outbreak in 1980s as explained in paragraph 4 above, the Rabies Ordinance (Cap. 421) was enacted to specifically strengthen the control of rabies. Section 7(1)(d) of the Rabies Ordinance empowers authorised officers to seize and detain any mammalian animal (except human beings) "*that he has reasonable grounds to believe (i) has not been vaccinated against rabies.....(ii) has not been licensed .....(iv) has bitten any person.*"

## **OBSERVATION OF DOGS AND CATS**

8. WHO advises that rabies is a vaccine-preventable disease, and more than 15 million people worldwide receive a post-bite vaccination annually that would prevent death from rabies. As a precautionary measure on public health grounds, it is therefore of utmost importance to put the animal with symptoms under observation as soon as possible once a biting incident has occurred so as to minimise the risk of outbreak of rabies in the community. It is worth noting that while the risk of transmission by dogs has been reduced through mandatory vaccination (footnote 1 refers), cats and other mammalian animals remain potential carriers of rabies virus since the proportion of vaccination in these animals is relatively low.

9. As provided in the Rabies Ordinance, the keeper of an animal that has bitten a person shall report the case to the Police. AFCD, upon receiving referral from the Police, will contact both the bitten person and the keeper to investigate the case. The animal concerned will need to be put under observation for a period of 7 days from the date of the incident. The length of the observation period is specified having regard to the time for symptoms of rabies to further develop.

10. For observation, the biting animal will be taken to one of AFCD's Animal Management Centres (AMCs) under the care of veterinary officers of AFCD. In view of the close animal-keeper bond in some cases, AFCD also allows the option of home observation provided that the animal is on up-to-date rabies vaccination (i.e. within 3 years of vaccination) and does not have repeated attack history in the past. AFCD officers will conduct regular inspections of the animal during the 7-day observation period to monitor the animal's health status. In occasional circumstances, if the animal has exhibited other health issues which warrant close monitoring by a veterinarian, AFCD will also allow the animal to be kept in a private veterinary clinic under the care of a veterinarian.

11. The keeper can reclaim the animal (if it is not under home observation) after the observation period. If the animal displays clinical signs consistent with rabies and dies within the observation period, it will be further tested for rabies.

12. In 2015 and 2016, there were a total of about 1 300 animals put under observation for rabies, with the majority (62%) undergone home observation. Most of the animals undergoing home observation were dogs, though on some occasions cats were put under home observation when the circumstances permit. Amongst those owned animals kept in AMCs, most were reclaimed by their keeper after the observation was completed. In some cases, due to the temperament of the animal as shown by the biting behaviour or other reasons, the keeper might choose to leave the animal to AFCD after the observation. The surrendered animal would be handled in accordance with the established procedures where its health and temperament will be further assessed by AFCD for suitability of rehoming.

13. Safeguarding human health is of paramount importance. Given the high fatality rate of rabies, any slackness in the work in preventing rabies from re-emerging might result in fatal consequences. The observation is one of the many measures we put in place to protect the bitten persons and those who have been in contact with the biting animals. At the same time, the health condition of the animal under observation is monitored closely by either AFCD's veterinary officer or private veterinarian. While the preventive measures we have put in place have been successful in keeping Hong Kong free of rabies for the past three decades, we have to remain vigilant against this fatal disease, and continue to implement the preventive measures to protect our public health.

## **ADVICE SOUGHT**

14. Members are invited to note the content of the paper.

**Food and Health Bureau  
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department  
October 2017**