



Summary: Forum on Scientific, Effective and Humane Rabies Control in China

In response to the [Hanzhong dog culling](#), a forum was organised in Beijing on June 28th, 2009, to discuss scientific and humane alternatives for rabies prevention and control in the country. The forum was organised by the China Medical Foundation, China Medical Rescue Association, Capital Animal Welfare Association and ACTAsia for Animals.

Currently, the mass killing of dogs is one of the main and only measures used by local government authorities to control rabies. This policy has been used from Mouding to Hanzhong, and has attracted international attention as well as local public reaction because of the methods used and the indiscriminate killing of animals, including healthy, vaccinated and owned dogs.

Epidemiologists, academics, political representatives and NGO representatives got together to discuss methods of scientific and humane rabies prevention and control and practical measures to implement these methods; provide local areas, particularly rural areas, with practical guidelines; and make a joint effort to promote rabies prevention in China.

Media representatives participated in the forum and reported on the event. They included representatives from the People's Daily, BTV, Science and Technology Daily, Beijing News, Beijing Youth Daily, Jing Hua Times, Science Times, Popular Science, China Industrial Economy News, Knowledge is Power, bubchn.com and vodone.com.

Participant views:

Participants criticised the culling in Hanzhong and using culling in general as a reactive approach to rabies control. According to them, "Indiscriminate mass culling" takes the shine off the "historic and cultural city" of Hanzhong. They questioned the use of public power to kill dogs on the streets, even in front of children, and wondered what kind of message this was sending out about the value of life.

Zhu Peikang (Chairman of the China Medical Foundation) said: "This is the first such forum co-sponsored by medical and animal protection organisations. Humans and animals should harmoniously coexist, and with more and more people keeping dogs, it is very important to address this issue."

Li Zonghao (Deputy Director and Secretary General of the Standing Committee of the China Medical Rescue Association) added: "It is unnecessary to use an extreme method to deal with this problem."

Jia Youling (China's Chief Veterinary Officer, Member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) pointed out that "currently, the coverage of rabies vaccination in China is less than 10%, which cannot prevent rabies effectively". He also added that when human rabies deaths are reported, some local governments react with panic and start killing dogs indiscriminately, which is not only expensive, but is also detrimental to the Chinese government's goal of a harmonious society.

According to Qin Xiao Na, Director of the Capital Animal Welfare Association (CAWA), "The dog killers beat or strangle animals to death, and even encourage the locals to do so. Apart from the huge amounts of suffering faced by the animals involved, this is unacceptable because of the emotional suffering for pet owners and other members of the public, including children, who have to witness this brutal massacre on the streets."

Tang Qing (China Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) and Isobel Zhang (China Manager of ACTAsia for Animals) both pointed out that "successful programmes have used a two-pronged approach – mass vaccination of dogs, and availability and awareness of prompt post-exposure treatment for humans. A humane rabies control programme in China should be recognised and adopted by the authorities at central and regional levels."

Dr Lu Jiahai, epidemiologist (University of Sun Yat-Sen), claimed that "reasons for the high incidence of rabies cases in China include the lack of coordination between different government departments, low animal vaccination coverage, failure to maintain vaccine quality and lack of knowledge on necessary actions after dog bites." Bai Xiaorong (Deputy Chief Physician, Disease Control Centre, Hunan province) said: "Compared to diseases transmitted through air or contact, rabies is relatively easier to prevent—rabies will not occur if the wound is properly treated and timely vaccinations are given after dog bites."

Bai Jiefu, former Chairman of the Beijing Municipal Committee, and Executive Deputy Mayor of Beijing, said in the closing speech: "This forum is very important. To establish a harmonious society, one of the first requirements is that the government, at all levels, must change its mindset from that of conflict to harmony. It has been proven over the years that culling is not a scientific and effective method. On the contrary, it can intensify conflict and expand an epidemic. A panicked response to rabies by local leaders raises questions about their mindset and capability. Shanxi is my hometown, and I hope that the Shanxi government officials will open their minds to listen to expert opinions on this issue and not insist on continuing to do the wrong thing. They need to learn lessons from the past to establish Shanxi as a good example of civilisation and progress."

All the participants spoke frankly, and there was a lively debate on rabies prevention and animal protection in China. They gave their views on how rabies could be prevented and animal protection could be improved in China, and appealed for legislation on these issues.

Key points of the forum and discussion:

- This is the first forum co-sponsored by medical and animal protection non-profit groups. All

experts present unanimously agreed with the importance of the forum.

- It is the first time that government authorities, representatives from central and local Disease Control Centres, animal protection NGOs, epidemiologists and experts from other fields came together to discuss the rabies situation in China and explore possible solutions.
- Every participant, no matter from which field, condemned the inhumane mass culling done by the Hanzhong government and others. They also agreed that indiscriminate mass culling is an ineffective and unscientific measure of rabies control.
- Rabies is a controllable disease. Positive measures of rabies control should include dog registration, compulsory dog vaccinations, and humane stray animal management. As early as the 1970s, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had put forward that culling alone is ineffective. There are many successful examples of rabies control in other countries that can be used to inform the process in China. Within the country, Beijing and Shanghai have had no human rabies cases for the last ten years, with primary control measures being canine vaccination and public awareness efforts on rabies prevention. Even when dogs are caught and removed in these areas, only rabid dogs are targeted.
- Although China has the second highest incidence of human rabies in the world – around 3,000 fatalities annually - it is far below India (20,000 cases). Positive and active prevention could reduce the number of rabies cases. Also, compared to other diseases such as hepatitis B, rabies is not that widespread. Exaggerating the seriousness of rabies only leads to panic from the general public, resulting in some authorities believing that extreme measures are their only option.

There appears to be no direct relationship between the incidence of canine rabies and an increase in the number of dogs in cities. In recent years, the number of registered dogs has reached 800,000 in Beijing, but canine rabies cases have not increased. In developed countries, the ratio of dogs to people is much higher than in China, but there have been very few rabies cases there. Rabies cases in rural China are related to the neglect of local animal management departments. Rural areas contain mostly unvaccinated backyard dogs, and this, coupled with a lack of timely post-exposure vaccinations and wound treatment, leads to the high incidence of rabies in rural areas.

Although currently the vaccine quality in China is of international standard, there are problems with transport and storage, as well as numerous cases of distribution of fake vaccines because of inadequate supervision.

- The rabies situation in China also indicates that the rabies prevention system for owned dogs is inadequate. International consensus is that effective rabies prevention requires canine vaccination coverage of at least 70%, but in China's rural areas it is less than 10%, which needs to be improved urgently. The main focus of rabies prevention programmes should be in rural areas, and should include awareness of the importance of vaccinations and post-exposure treatment. In both urban and rural areas dog population management and registration and vaccination of owned animals is needed.

To prevent rabies over the long term, and make government-led killings history, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Public Security and other relevant government departments could promote rabies prevention in owned and stray animals throughout the country. This could also be done first in a few provinces and then modified

- according to results for the rest of the country.
- Data collection and monitoring should be strengthened. In Hanzhong, for example, the local government dealing with the situation did not follow the Technical Specifications for Rabies Prevention and Control issued by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2006. Instead of following their guidelines to cull only sick animals and animals which were bitten by infected ones, up to an area of 3km around the rabies outbreak zone, the Hanzhong authorities killed all the dogs they could find, including healthy, registered and vaccinated dogs, with no geographical boundaries. This indiscriminate killing caused panic among the public.
 - It is extremely rare for healthy dogs to transmit the rabies virus, and healthy animals are not known to be 'carriers' of the rabies virus – so this source of the virus, according to the experts, has no public health importance. However, poor testing techniques often lead to high rates of false positives, leading to the killing of many healthy dogs and unnecessary post-exposure treatment for bitten people. This also affects the government's ability to get a clear picture of the situation and create effective prevention strategies.
 - National legislation is the key to successful rabies prevention. The companion animal section in a national animal protection law could be used to regulate pet breeding and sales, to stop abuse to both owned and stray animals, and to outline humane population control. Legislation should prioritise the importance of rabies prevention, define local government responsibilities, allocate budgets for vaccines and neutering, and implement widespread vaccination campaigns.
 - It was also suggested that modern techniques and media should be used to strengthen the public's understanding of rabies, while avoiding the creation of unnecessary fear. The concept of harmonious co-existence of animals and humans should be used to promote rabies prevention.
 - It was also suggested that the professional knowledge and passion of animal protection groups should be used to facilitate rabies prevention education, to help the government to promote dog registration, and to rescue abandoned animals in both rural and urban areas.

We hope that the recommendations of this forum will be a starting point to review the current methods of rabies control and move towards preventing and controlling rabies through scientific and humane methods. The forum proceedings are being sent to relevant government departments in different parts of the country.