

hindustantimes

A multipronged approach is needed to control dog menace

- **Krithika Srinivasan and Smitha Rao**
- Updated: Sep 15, 2015 23:01 IST

In India, dog control through eradication has been practised since the time of the British. More than a hundred years of eradication programmes, however, have had no significant impact. This is because when dogs are removed, other dogs move in to occupy the ecological niches (food and space) made vacant.

Recognising the ineffectiveness of eradication, and in line with the WHO advice, in 2001 animal birth control/neutering and anti-rabies vaccination programmes (ABC-ARV) were mandated. The ABC-ARV works by retaining a safe population of dogs in a locality. Vaccination prevents rabies and neutering makes dogs more docile. Furthermore, dogs are territorial animals and prevent new dogs from entering the neighbourhood. The removal of street dogs results in the influx of new dogs and increases the chances of dog bites due to fear and fighting.

In India, the ABC-ARV programmes in some cities have demonstrated the desired results. Jaipur saw a 28% decrease in dog populations in around 10 years of the programme; in Chennai, which adopted the ABC-ARV programme in 1996, human rabies deaths declined from 120 in 1996 to five in the mid-2000s. Across India, the number of human rabies cases declined from 534 in 2004 to 212 in 2012.

However, tragedies resulting from dog bites or mauling continue to occur. The occasional character of such tragedies attracts immense public anxiety and attention. Public anxiety in turn leads to demands for a return to eradication. Proponents of eradication point to countries like Britain and the United States, which have been successful in eradicating free-living dogs. However, in these countries, the ecological niches vacated by dogs are now occupied by other animals such as foxes, seagulls and coyotes, which pose similar risks.

What is common to dogs, foxes, coyotes, and seagulls is that they thrive on the by-products of human society — on the spaces and food wastes generated by human lifestyles. Furthermore, the risks associated with these animals are created by particular kinds of interactions between people, human behaviours (especially food waste), and these animals.

In other words, the causes of dog bites are multidimensional. Yet, the focus has been entirely on controlling dogs. The problem, however, is not dogs per se, but dog bites and rabies. Most dogs don't bite, and most bites do not result in rabies or serious injury. Dogs are just one element of a complex set of factors that result in bites and rabies. Therefore, these public health risks cannot be addressed by controlling dogs alone, but require a multipronged approach that must incorporate three elements: Proper waste management; public education with regard to how to interact with free-living dogs; and systematic ABC-ARV. Such a

multidimensional approach is required for any public health and safety concern, whether traffic accidents or Aids.

In the absence of programmes that address the multidimensional factors that lead to dog bites and rabies, efforts to address these risks will remain ineffective. Until all concerned groups arrive at such an understanding of this issue and cooperate in implementing a multipronged strategy, these debates and the unfortunate incidents that spark them are bound to continue.

(Krithika Srinivasan is lecturer in human geography, University of Exeter and Smitha Rao is an independent researcher. The views expressed are personal.)

Available at: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/a-multipronged-approach-is-needed-to-control-dog-menace/article1-1390624.aspx> (last accessed 20/09/2015)