

# The Rabies Risk Factor

## THE K9 PAGE

In an ominous move to generate income, certain provincial governments started policing the conservation laws last season. Road blocks were set up and shooting licences inspected. If you did not have your gun licence, shooting licence and permission from the landowner (or a certificate donating the meat by the landowner) and you were in possession of birds (legal species only, hopefully), you were in trouble. And if you did, you were OK, you reckon? Not so!

'Are those dogs back there in the car?'

'Yes officer, they're our gundogs.'

'Please show me the compulsory Rabies Vaccination Certificates.'

'What?'

There is no cure for rabies. Once symptoms develop, this disease is always fatal. It is endemic throughout Southern Africa. Family pets, spending their lives in the city, are not as exposed to the disease. But the risk of a gun dog — which goes out into the veld and which can easily get bitten by rodents, meercats or local dogs — contracting rabies is a thousand times greater than the city poodle! And this increases the risk to you or your children a thousand times too!

Because it has been around for so many years, many people now believe that rabies has disappeared. Even though modern medicine has the facilities to limit the incidence of the disease, it has not been eradicated. There have already been five confirmed cases and one unconfirmed case of human rabies in the first half of this year. In 1998, there were nine rabies deaths, 11 in 1996 and a frightening 26 human deaths in 1995. All as the result of bites from rabid dogs. These are only the reported and confirmed cases in South Africa.

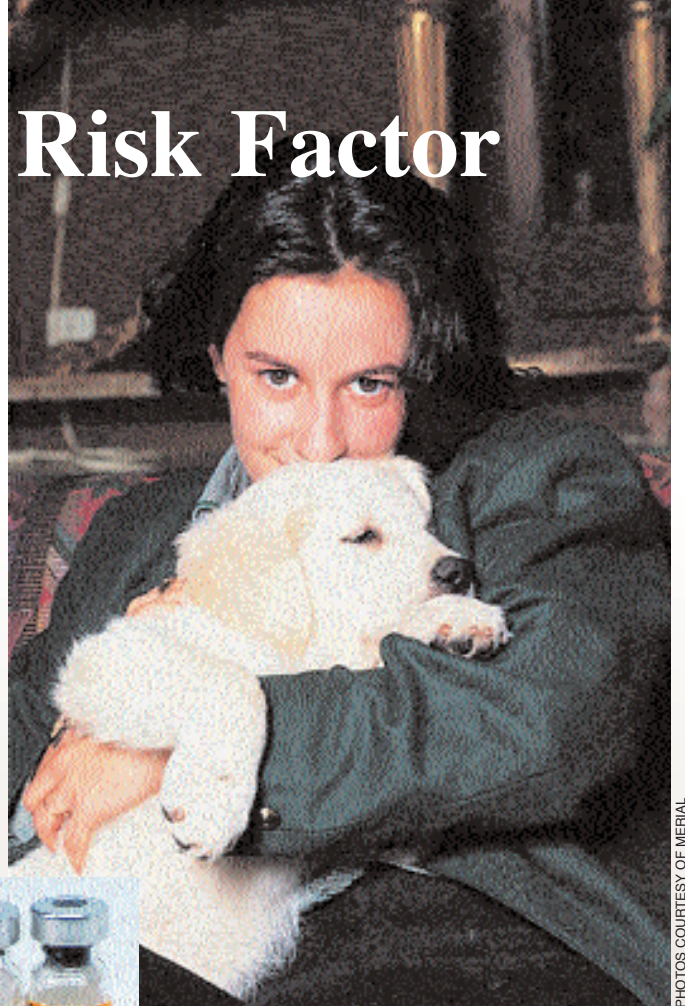
That is why it is now, by law, compulsory to vaccinate dogs and cats annually against rabies. Pet owners must be in possession of valid vaccination certificates for their animals. And if you and your gundog are driving from one province to go shooting in another province, you'd better have the certificate with you!

Once infected by rabies, the period of incubation can last months and the dog can already be very contagious at this stage before any symptoms of the disease are seen. Diseased dogs undergo a particularly ferocious phase during which they may bite violently and without provocation. Paralytic forms of the disease are more difficult to diagnose, although the risk of transmission is the same.

Infection of humans generally occurs as the result of a bite from an animal whose saliva contains the virus. Also, a scratch spattered with the animal's saliva or lick on a fresh wound can be contagious.

The first clinical signs of rabies only appear on average 20 to 90 days after contamination. Vaccination remains the only means of saving those who have been exposed to the disease. If carried out immediately after infection, the vaccination can prevent the onset of symptoms. If not, the disease is fatal.

The shortest periods of incubation occur in children where bites are situated in areas such as fingers, head, face and neck. The first warning signs include a feeling of pins and needles, itching and pain where the original bite took place and behavioural changes e.g. the victim becoming disinterested in the



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family or showing excessive affection. Rabies can manifest itself in three different forms: spastic, dementia or paralytic. All three end inevitably in the death of the patient, unless vaccinated very soon after the bite.

As a precaution, any suspicious bite must undergo immediate care. This includes cleaning the injury thoroughly with soap and water and the administration of the vaccine as soon as possible. Ideally, the injuries should not be sutured for 24 to 48 hours, to prevent the virus from spreading into the nervous fibres. However, if stitches are necessary, then it is advisable to accompany the vaccination with the administration of specific immuno-globulins. An anti-tetanus prophylaxis and an antibiotic treatment should be administered to avoid additional infections.

Most vaccines consist of the inactivated rabies virus which activates the immune system in forming antibodies against rabies. After completion of the treatment, the immunity may last for several years. It is important to establish if the animal causing the bite is healthy or diseased. An unknown animal, or one which has disappeared, must be automatically considered as rabid, and treatment of the victim must start immediately and be carried out in full. Pets which can be identified must be placed under observation and it is advisable to check if they have been effectively vaccinated against rabies. The State Veterinarian of the area should be notified of the incidence. If it is proven that the suspect animal is healthy, treatment may then be halted.

When taking your dog for his annual booster vaccinations, the rabies vaccine can be administered at the same time. In fact, the **Eurican**<sup>®</sup> vaccine introduced by the world's leading animal healthcare company Merial, encompasses all the required vaccines, including rabies. Don't take chances, ask your vet for **Eurican**<sup>®</sup> when you take your dog for his annual all-in-one vaccination and rest assured that you have provided your family with all the protection you can. ▲