Rabies in the UK: are we at risk of a relapse?

A new RSPCA report says that the risk of rabies entering the UK via illegally imported puppies is on the rise. Charlotte Simmonds assesses the issue.

Rabies is a disease that haunts the public imagination. At its Victorian-era height the virus never killed more than a hundred annually, yet it incited enormous public concern and left a deep cultural footprint. Britain’s “rabies-free” status, earned in 1902 following the imposition of six-month quarantines for any dog entering the country, was an achievement that stirred collective pride.

Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys, authors of Mad Dogs and Englishmen, have called the eradication of rabies “a fixture of national identity” that went on to colour the political rhetoric of the likes of Margaret Thatcher, “exemplifying the country’s essential difference to Continental Europe - an island people, enjoying security and liberty behind closed borders.”

Britain still enjoys isolation from a disease that kills more than 55,000 people globally each year, according to the World Health Organisation. In over a century the UK has seen just a handful of human cases, according to Public Health England – 28 since 1902, and all but two were the result of viruses caught abroad.

The success of the anti-rabies project has been down to strict controls over the movement of dogs, which are responsible for more than 90 per cent of infections (though cats, bats, foxes, skunks and raccoons are also known carriers). “History teaches us that import controls are an important tool in achieving and maintaining disease freedom,” says Nigel Gibbens, the UK’s Chief Veterinary Officer. “Britain first achieved rabies-free status through a combination of quarantine, disease surveillance, the management of stray dog populations, the promotion of responsible dog ownership and acting swiftly when disease was detected.”

Relaxing the rules

Yet a new report published by the RSPCA, Pushing at an open door: how the present UK controls on rabies are failing (March 2014), claims the government should be keeping a closer eye on the number of puppies illegally brought into the UK via seemingly legal methods. Controls on the movement of animals declared “personal pets” within the EU have increasingly relaxed since 2000, and this – says the RSPCA – means the risk of rabies entering the UK undetected is on the rise.

How have the rules changed? Dogs imported into the UK can travel along two pathways – either as commercial or as personal property. The rules for dogs imported with commercial intent have changed very little since coming in line with EU laws in 1992 – they must be declared to the relevant customs authorities, come from recognised breeders, and undergo the proper vaccination and identification (such as micro-chipping).

Since 2000, as part of harmonising efforts between EU member states, rules around the free movements of personal pets have relaxed. Under the Pets Travel Scheme (PETS), dogs are exempt from quarantine so long as they meet appropriate standards of vaccination and veterinary certification. Both the RSPCA and the government have welcomed these changes, since long periods of quarantine have a negative impact on a dog’s wellbeing.

“Scientific research has enabled the development of effective vaccines for pet animals and improved our understanding of the rabies virus, including its incubation period,” explains Gibbens. “PETS was responding to a call from pet owners and animal welfare charities.”

Unintended consequences

Yet the new rules had an unintended consequence, says David Bowles, head of public affairs at the RSPCA. As of 2012, all pet dogs entering the country could avoid quarantine if they met the PETS requirements (prior to this, dogs had to be travelling from a low rabies-risk country, or an EU member state). This, says Bowles, was a turning point. “Anything that supports people travelling freely with their animals is obviously a good thing. If we get it right then welfare improves, but if we get it wrong, then it is a huge risk. Since 2012, we have observed an increase in people who have bought puppies that were then becoming sick. These puppies didn’t have the right paperwork and hadn’t been properly vaccinated. It became clear that they were coming from foreign dealers and had been bred in poor conditions.”

Dealers bring puppies in under PETS, rather than commercial rules, because it saves them time and money, explains Bowles. “Arranging for the commercial import of dogs can take weeks, whereas if the animal comes in under non-commercial rules, you don’t have to alert anyone and you are less scrutinised.”

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He explains. “PETS can be fairly easily abused in a number of ways. Everyone has a personal allowance of five dogs, so dealers arrive in transit vans with four
people and 20 dogs. It has also been possible to scam the system by forging a veterinarian's signatures, or simply finding a corrupt vet to say the dog has been vaccinated and micro-chipped when it has not."

While exact numbers are impossible to determine, the RSPCA's report makes inferences based on certain trends. For example, the number of dogs imported under PETS from Romania, Poland, Lithuania and Hungary (identified by the RSPCA as dog-breeding centres) has gone up more than fivefold since 2011. They say that new immigrants bringing their pets with them simply cannot account for this jump, suggesting PETS is being exploited as a loophole into the lucrative UK market.

"The punishment for getting caught is quite severe - dealers could face a fine and even prison," says Bowles. "Yet the risk of getting caught is very low. At ports such as Dover and Holyhead, where most of the traders come through, enforcement is minimal because it is not a huge priority. We've identified the trade routes and some Mr Bigs - Saturday morning seems a favourite weekly time to come through with 20 or 30 dogs."

A nation of dog lovers
Part of the problem is that the UK is a valuable market, and many customers are happy to buy a desirable breed at a low cost. English bulldogs, French bulldogs and pugs are the most popular, says Bowles.

"The illegal trade is driven by demand for cheap, pedigree puppies," agrees Gibbens. He adds that it is the consumer's responsibility to help stop illegal trade by doing research before buying. The government have even published guidance, such as checking the animal's vaccination records before taking it home. Shifty dealing is certainly no small scale problem; the government, working with the Pet Advertising Advisory Group, has identified and removed some 130,000 problematic pet adverts in the last year alone.1

Bowles adds that failing to assess the provenance of an animal before purchasing can be costly. "People are handing over £600 pounds to a dealer they've got no recourse with. If the animal gets sick and you take it to the vet, it is very likely the animal will be placed into six months of quarantining. Suddenly, you're faced with a bill of thousands just to get your puppy back."

The risk reality
Consensus is that both public awareness and a stronger arm at the border will be needed to curtail the issue. Yet against heavier customs concerns – such as immigration, drug smuggling and human trafficking – should the issue be high on the country's radar? For many, the prevalence of rabies among domesticated and wild animals in Eastern Europe gives cause for concern. According to the WHO's Collaboration Centre for Rabies Surveillance and Research, Hungary saw 22 cases of wild and domestic rabies in 2014, Poland saw 105 and Romania 142. 2

Gibbens concedes that the risk assessment carried out by government, prior to harmonising with EU laws in 2012, showed the risk of rabies entering the UK would increase, but insists it remains low. "It is worth noting that reported rabies cases within the EU have fallen by 60 per cent since the data for that risk assessment was made in 2007-2008," he adds. "Rabies has never been transmitted between two EU member states due to the movement of pets, either legally or illegally. However, the risk cannot be completely eliminated."

Bowles agrees that the dangers should not be wildly exaggerated, but that it would be very wrong to ignore the issue. "It is true that there has never been a case of rabies in the EU due to the dog trade since the control have been relaxed," says Bowles. "Governments tend not to focus on these sorts of issues until they become a problem, but that does not mean it won't be. We are winning the battle against rabies, and the UK has been rabies-free for 100 years or so, but all you need is one case. You can imagine what the headlines would be. Indeed we can; if the mad-dog imagery that accompanies news coverage of any rabies scare might act as a compass, then it seems the fear is still alive and biting in the British psychology.

2 WHO World Rabies Day Announcement, 28 September 2014 http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6338a6.htm