

Rabies update

There have been no new reports of laboratory-confirmed cases of human rabies in South Africa since June 2013. In the first half of year 2013, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has confirmed five cases of human rabies. These cases originated from Mpumalanga (n=1), KwaZulu-Natal (n=1), Limpopo (n=1) and Free State (n=2) provinces.

One case of clinical rabies was reported to the NICD in the past month. The patient, a seven-year-old boy from Ncwasa Location in Mqanduli about 20 kilometres from Mthatha, Eastern Cape Province, is suspected to have died of rabies on 18 May 2013 in Zithulele Provincial Hospital. His health had deteriorated rapidly over three days. The patient presented with itching on the ventral aspect of the knee joint on 16 May. The child refused to eat despite having an appetite. On the same day the child was taken to the nearest clinic. He was given antihelminthic drug to treat a possible infection with parasitic worms. On the next day, the child was admitted to Zithulele Hospital. He acted in a strange manner, looked confused, was restless and hypersalivating. His condition worsened and he died

on the day of admission after failed attempts of resuscitation. Investigation yielded no evidence of dog bite exposure. No post-mortem examination on the deceased child was done to determine the exact cause of death. Based on the clinical presentation and fatal outcome, this is a likely case of rabies.

Besides bites, rabies virus transmission is also possible through superficial wounds such as scratches that breach the epidermis. These may heal quickly and be inapparent when signs and symptoms of rabies appear. Young children are less likely to report these seemingly benign injuries to their caregivers. Transmission may also occur through contamination of mucous membranes such as licking of the face (i.e. eyes, nose and mouth). Although these exposures are considered of less risk than invasive bite wounds, rabies post-exposure prophylaxis is still required. This would include wound treatment (i.e. washing) and rabies vaccination as per national guidelines.

Source: Centre for Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases, and Division of Public Health Surveillance and Response, NICD-NHLS.