Two cases of human rabies have been confirmed since the previous report. Rabies was confirmed in a 10-year-old child from the Butterworth area of the Eastern Cape Province following testing of post-mortem brain samples. The child died at the end of March 2019, reportedly following a two-week illness with hyper-salivation, depressed mental state and fever. No clear animal exposure history was provided, but the child was known to play with dogs in the neighbourhood. The brain samples were only available for rabies testing in May 2019.

The second case was reported in a 19-year-old from Ga-Mabitsela (located approximately 70 km northwest of Polokwane), Limpopo Province. The patient sustained dog bites on the finger and lacerations on the face, at the end of January 2019. The case received post-exposure prophylaxis following the dog bite; however, investigations revealed that rabies immunoglobulin was administered intramuscularly, instead of around the bite sites. The patient was admitted to hospital in early March with depressed consciousness, and demised in the last week of April 2019. The diagnosis of rabies was confirmed on post-mortem brain samples.

These cases bring to five the number of human rabies reported in South Africa for 2019 to date, three from the Eastern Cape Province and two from Limpopo Province. Correct clinical management of dog bites is critical to ensure effectiveness of post-exposure prophylaxis. Rabies must be considered in any person with a progressive encephalitis even if no history of animal exposure is given. Children, in particular, may not report an animal exposure. Important clinical signs suggestive of rabies include a localised area of hyperaesthesia at the bite site, fever, hallucinations, aggressive behaviour, hyper-salivation, hydrophobia and spasms.

Source: Centre for Emerging Zoonotic and Parasitic Diseases, NICD-NHLS; januszp@nicd.ac.za

Figure 1. Surveillance maps indicating confirmed and suspected cases of animal rabies, and confirmed cases of human rabies in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces as of 22 May 2019.