

ZOONOTIC AND VECTOR-BORNE DISEASES

An update on rabies in South Africa

In May 2020, we report a probable case of human rabies from the Eastern Cape Province. The case involved a 10-year-old child who died shortly after admission in hospital on 13 May. On 17 April 2020, the child was attacked by a dog and received rabies vaccine following the exposure. It was unclear if she also received rabies immunoglobulin as part of the rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) regimen. Although completely well prior to presentation to hospital, on admission, she was unconscious and had seizures with associated neurological fall-out. The NICD obtained saliva and cerebrospinal fluid samples for rabies testing on the day of death. These samples tested negative for rabies by PCR. No post-mortem brain samples were obtained to confirm rabies in this child. Given the history of exposure to a dog prior to illness and a clinical history that is compatible with the diagnosis of rabies, this case was classified as a probable rabies case in the absence of laboratory confirmation.

For South Africa this year, only one case of human rabies, reported here, has been identified. The COVID-19 pandemic and its response have led to a setback of several public health programmes, including rabies. South Africa may have unrecognised cases, considering that during 2019 16 cases were reported, of which seven were from the Eastern Cape Province and the other nine were from KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces. As an example, in the Eastern Cape Province, sampling of animals that were euthanised or found dead reported 33 animal rabies cases in 2020 (Figure 1). Canine rabies remains a veterinary and public health crisis in South Africa's east coast. Nearly all human deaths are caused

by dog bites. Children are at high risk, with more than half of 2019's reported rabies cases aged less than 18 years (56%, 9/16). This is a recognised phenomenon as children are more vulnerable to not disclosing dog or other animal contact or bite, and are therefore unlikely to receive appropriate and timely anti-rabies PEP.

With appropriate post-exposure prophylaxis, rabies is 100% preventable. There is a need to promote continued awareness in the community and at healthcare facilities. Details on rabies, its treatment and prevention, and collection of specimens for diagnosis can be found on the NICD website: www.nicd.ac.za.

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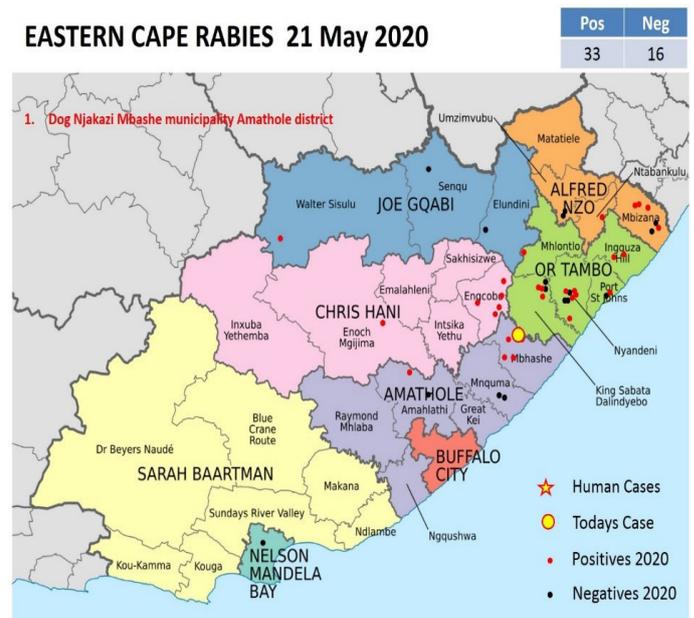


Figure 1. Canine and human rabies detection in Eastern Cape Province.

Source: Kevin le Roux, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development, KwaZulu-Natal Province.

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