

Testimonial for World Rabies Day 2009; The Fort, Taguig

September 27, 2009

* This testimonial was intended to be delivered during the Philippine celebration of World Rabies Day at The Fort, Taguig. The whole day event was canceled due to Typhoon Ondoy which claimed killed scores of Metro Manila and Central Luzon residents, disrupted the lives of millions of Filipinos and caused immense damage to properties and the economy. Our condolences to the families of Typhoon Ondoy fatalities.

My first brush with rabies was something that nobody would care to cherish. As a young and adventurous lad in Cotabato, I had to endure 25 shots of anti-rabies vaccine after our dog, Krushev bit me in the arm. He died after a few days and my father, who is a Doctor of Medicine, immediately administered anti-rabies shots on me. I remember my elder brother Bongbong giving me a “diploma” during a mock graduation ceremony he held as I received the last of my 25 shots.

A few years after Krushev, a neighbor’s dog bit me, this time on the face near my left eyebrow. By this time, the embryo technology had been developed and the painful shots were significantly lesser. My experiences taught me a simple lesson in life – Be wary of dog bites because these could cause rabies. Years later, when I had children of my own, I taught them to be gentle to dogs, to avoid provoking and playing with them so as not to get bitten. Apparently, the lessons I passed on to them were not enough. Two days before Christmas last year, I lost my youngest son to rabies.

Gian Carlo “Poypoy” Tomen was only five years old when he died a horrible and painful death by rabies. He was a playful child - full of life, brimming with energy and oozing with talent and potential. He came 10 years after our second child was born. He was everybody’s child – charming his way into people’s hearts with his good looks, his infectious laughter, and his endearing innocence.

Our nightmare began on December 21, 2008 when, after a trip at SM-Clark for last-minute shopping, Poypoy began itching at the back of his left shoulder. The itching lasted the whole night despite the anti-itch lotion we applied and the anti-allergy drug that he took. The following day, December 22, his condition got worse. In addition to the itching, he was uneasy as he complained of stomachache. He couldn’t eat a thing and vomited whatever he took in. A pediatrician prescribed another anti-allergy drug, but still he didn’t get well.

Late noon, Poypoy, who had always been wary of doctors and nurses begged to be brought to the hospital. His cries had turned to shouts of pain. One of Pampanga's best pediatricians came to attend to him. Allergy was still suspected as the main cause of his illness. He was hooked to a dextrose, his vital signs monitored regularly, and blood tests were done to determine the source of his illness. It was another sleepless night as he turned increasingly restless moving around his bed every few minutes or so. In the morning, the lab tests came in, indicating a sudden rise in his blood sugar level. It continued to rise as the day progressed so he was administered insulin shots to arrest it.

He turned violent by mid-morning, causing the needle connecting his dextrose to bend out of shape. He asked for water to drink but he could barely take a sip. He began to drool. That was when we remembered that around three months before, in October, he was scratched by our next-door neighbor's pet dog, a cocker spaniel while playing with his friend (the son of that said neighbor) in our apartment's front yard. Three long scratch wounds that appeared deep at first glance healed quickly after the dog's owner, an emergency room nurse, applied tincture of iodine on my son's fresh wounds.

We told the pediatrician about this and we all wondered, "Could it be rabies?" We requested for our son's immediate transfer to San Lazaro Hospital where he died an hour after he was admitted. Perhaps, at that time, most of you were busy doing last minute Christmas shopping and preparing a feast for your families to share. We spent Christmas at the mortuary of St. Augustine Parish in Lubao, Pampanga, my wife's hometown.

What we discovered about rabies after my son's death came as a shock. More so when all eight of us, who rode with him in the ambulance were prevented from coming home without getting anti-rabies shots that cost us at least P 6,000.00 per person for the first shot alone. The succeeding second and third shots cost us P 1,200.00 each. The rest of our family and everyone who came to visit him at the hospital were required to have their anti-rabies shots as well. The cost was staggering to a middle class family like ours.

But more than the financial weigh down, the grief that our son's death caused us was unparalleled. We could only ask ourselves how a simple scratch could claim the life of our precious child. How could it have happened? How could we miss the possibility of him contracting rabies after a dog scratch?

We discovered a few things that would have mattered in Poypoy's case. First, the cocker spaniel that scratched him had her last vaccination three years ago; second, the dog escaped 3 or 5 days after the incident but only after biting her owner while she was being tied; third, any wound caused by a canine and feline attack has to be washed thoroughly before being administered antiseptic; and fourth, the smallest wound or break on the skin (be it a bite or a scratch or a lick on an open wound) caused by a canine and feline attack merits serious and immediate professional attention, especially if the attacking animal escapes, dies or exhibits a change in behavior. These discoveries came too late for us. Fortunately, people can learn from our experience.

Poypoy was just one of the thousands who died of rabies last year. An estimated 55,000 patients die of rabies worldwide each year. The World Health Organization says that 31,000 of these come from Asia and the rest from Africa. Dog rabies is responsible for more than 14 million courses of post-exposure treatment to prevent the onset of the disease – a very costly prospect for a struggling economy like ours.

We have yet to fully reap the benefits of modern technology that has made pre-exposure vaccination available and affordable. The lack of information on the availability of pre-exposure vaccine has been a significant hindering factor in minimizing risks especially among children aged 5 to 14 years, the most vulnerable age group. It is our fervent hope that rabies will be included in the regular immunization regimen among children, coupled with massive information dissemination about the availability of pre-exposure vaccine for both children and adults.

If people are willing to spend to have their children immunized against chickenpox or pertussis which are curable diseases anyway, why can't they spend for their loved ones' protection against a disease that has a 100% fatality rate? Recently, the whole world was thrown in a state of panic because of the A H1N1 flu virus, a disease that has approximately 1 % fatality rate and dengue with its 10% mortality rate. If we can go all out in the campaign against these curable diseases, perhaps we can also give rabies equal attention because thousands of years after it was first discovered, there is still no available cure for full-blown cases. Rabies has been known to infect animals and humans since the ancient days of 2300 B.C.

Realizing that Poypoy's case can save people from a painful and horrible death, we embarked on an anti-rabies advocacy through the RABIES-POI (Rabies Prevention and Organized Intervention) Program of SANGKAP (Santungan ng Kababaihan at Kabataan sa Pampanga). We have realized the value of telling and re-telling our story in the hope that it can spark awareness about the causes and effects of rabies.

After holding the first public forum on rabies in the Province of Pampanga last March 27, 2009, SANGKAP had undertaken the following:

- a) Printing and distribution of 200 pcs. of anti-rabies posters/tarpaulin for distribution among city, municipal and provincial veterinarians (during the National Convention of Veterinarians of the Philippines, in coordination with Dr. Jess Villaroman, City Veterinarian of Angeles)
- b) Distribution of 50 pcs. Of anti-rabies posters among the barangays of Angeles City, the area with the highest rabies morbidity in Central Luzon
- c) Involvement in the anti-rabies campaign of the City Government of Angeles through membership in the Research and Information Dissemination Committee of the Coalition Against Rabies Disease
- d) Sponsoring the launching of “Story-telling with Bp. Ambo David” last May 23, 2009, which featured rabies prevention and control as its subject (in partnership with the Holy Rosary Parish-Social Action Center and the New Life Lay Missionaries, Inc. of Angeles City)
- e) Maintenance of a website (www.rabiespoi.org) which is dedicated solely to Rabies Prevention and Organized Intervention

We invite you to register, log in and post your rabies-related stories, articles, announcements, comments and suggestions on our website, www.rabiespoi.org . This is one way of facilitating information exchange among groups and individuals worldwide who believe in and are willing to take part in our advocacy.

Taking into consideration the mandates of various institutions prescribed by Republic Act 9482 (Anti-Rabies Act of 2007), we reiterate our commitment to collaborate with you, specifically in the areas of information/education/communications and policy advocacy. Only through concerted effort can we make an impact and greatly contribute to the national agenda of eradicating rabies in the Philippines by 2020.

Allow me to take the opportunity to thank the organizers of this event and the participants to this national celebration of the World Rabies Day. We remember with much love and affection, our dear son Poypoy and all those who succumbed to rabies. They have left us a mission to fulfill and a reason to carry on after our painful experience of watching them helplessly as they died a painful and horrible death. May I request for a few moments of silence to pray for the eternal repose of their souls..... Maraming salamat po at magandang umaga sa inyong lahat.