

A couple's sad memory of December

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Charles E. Buban

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MANILA, Philippines – For many of us, knowing it's already December is enough to get us into a festive mood. But this month of celebrations, getting together and gift-giving mean something else for couple Rex and Nina Tomen.

It was almost a year ago, this month, when the two lost their youngest son, 5-year-old Gian Carlo "Poypoy" Tomen, to rabies.

But what was more shocking was they did not know this fact until the day Poypoy died on the 23rd of December.

"It was the 21st when he complained about a severe itch at the back of his left shoulder. I remembered this was the same area where he was scratched by our neighbor's dog. But this was almost two months ago so the wound has healed already," recalled the father, who

together with his wife now heads an advocacy group that educates communities about rabies.

Playful

Like any other child, Rex recalled that Poypoy was very playful and full of energy.

“Unfortunately, this was probably the reason he also got the ire of our neighbor’s cocker spaniel. While playing in our front yard, he was attacked by the dog and got three long scratches. It was immediately tended to in a hospital and considering they were not bites, we decided not to worry so much about it,” said Rex who had no idea at the time this was already the beginning of their son’s demise.

But as explained by Dr. Beatriz Quiambao, Research Institute for Tropical Medicine Clinical Research Division and Rabies Research Group head, parents should be warned that rabies could be passed in the bite or scratch of an infected dog or cat.

“Symptoms may appear in just a few days but in a lot of times, rabies virus works its way so slowly yet steadily to the brain, sometimes taking months before tell-tale signs would start to manifest,” Quiambao informed.

Death, inevitable

And once the symptoms appear, death is virtually a foregone conclusion since only a handful of people have ever survived after developing the terrible symptoms of rabies—delirium, an unquenchable thirst but terrified by the sight of water, and of course, the strong desire to bite another person.

“By the time symptoms have manifested it is often too late because rabies is nearly 100 percent fatal at this late stage with the infected person dying painfully within days,” Quiambao said.

“We were all shocked after the doctors confirmed it was indeed rabies that killed our son (which was even compounded when all those who accompanied Poypoy in the ambulance were required to take anti-rabies shots as standard operating procedure or SOP). It was surreal but this also led us to promise ourselves to tell other parents what has just happened so they will be warned,” the father said.

The couple became members of an advocacy group called Santungan ng Kababaihan at Kabataan sa Pampanga (Sangkap) that seeks for local governments to enact anti-rabies ordinances that seek the prevention of rabies.

In fact, Sangkap recently launched its anti-rabies website (www.rabiespoi.org) to better provide data and pertinent information regarding rabies.

“At least through these advocacy campaigns, we would be able to help prevent more Poypoy's out there from dying too young from such a fatal but highly preventable disease,” Poypoy's mother said.

100% cure rate

Dr. Raffy Deray, national program manager of the Department of Health's National Center for Disease Prevention and Control clarified that rabies has an almost 100 percent cure rate when treated quickly with a series of shots.

He suggested that it would be better to err on the side of caution by not dismissing bites much more scratches from a dog or cat, whether pet or stray ones.

“The most cost-effective strategy for preventing rabies in the Philippines is by eliminating rabies in dogs—where 99 percent of the cases were attributed to—through animal vaccinations that usually cost around P100,” Deray stressed.

But since very few families or communities do care to have their dog, much more stray dog, vaccinated, the next best step is for family members to get the anti-rabies shot, especially if they are living in areas where incidence report is high.

He explained that preexposure rabies immunization (costs around P600 to P700 in government-run clinics and hospitals) simplifies management by eliminating the need for rabies immune globulin and decreasing the number of doses of rabies vaccine needed once the person is bitten or scratched.

Children, likely victims

“Vaccination of the whole family is also helpful considering that young children, who are mostly the victims, seldom report the incident to their parents for fear of getting admonished,” Deray said.

Quiambao added that another important step once bitten or scratched is to thoroughly wash the wound area with soap.

“Many people don’t realize that next to postbite immunization, the simple washing of the wound with water and soap does a lot to prevent rabies infection. Forget about applying garlic, vinegar and undergoing the “tandok” (a folk medicine done by placing a deer or carabao horn over the wound) as these methods will only cause more swelling, irritation and introduction of more dirt into the wound,” Quiambao reminded.

She added that patients who claimed they did not develop rabies after applying garlic or tandok application may not be actually bitten by a rabid dog.

In the Philippines, it is estimated that between 200 and 500 Filipinos die of rabies each year and at least 50 percent of these are children aged 5 to 14 years.

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