

Rabies is a Death Sentence

by Stephen Meredith



I hope that title got your attention, because if you contract rabies you are dead, there is no cure! Can you imagine my reaction when the doctors told me this as they were examining a dog bite on my hand?

It was the second day of a busy four-day circuit in Thailand. I was well into my breeds in the afternoon when suddenly – OUCH – I had been bitten.

Officials rushed to assist me and I was bandaged up and the show carried on. Later that afternoon, the Show Manager advised that the offending dog was a new import into the country and they could not validate its health records so I needed medical assistance.

I was taken to the hospital in Bangkok where I talked to a doctor who, although he only spoke a little broken English, managed to get the message across that this was a very serious situation. On asking him for information on the best way to deal with the bite, thinking maybe a tetanus injection or antibiotics, he proceeded to tell me the symptoms I could expect to get, should I contract rabies. RABIES! - Panic started to set in. The upshot was that I had to start 'post rabies' immunisation straight away. I had an injection that day and a further injection two days later. I was so concerned about the situation that I changed my flights to get home a day earlier than planned. I felt I really needed to see my own doctor as soon as possible, who subsequently referred me to the 'Travel Doctors' at Pukekohe who specialise in these types of matters.

Months later I have had a series of 12 injections, five of which were immunisation against Rabies, the other seven were Haemoglobin shots into the muscles in and around the bite on my hand. These were extremely painful and I hope I never need to endure this treatment again, and that was the medical side of the situation. The insurance claim was another matter.

I had purchased travel insurance on the internet, as so many of us do. I had answered all the questions asked BUT when it came time to make the claim, they declined it because they considered my visit to Thailand was a work-related trip and I had not declared it as such. In the end, with lots of communication backwards and forwards to the hospital in Thailand, I was lucky that ACC covered a substantial portion of the expenses associated with the hospital and follow up treatment.

As dog show judges, we sometimes travel to countries where Rabies is prevalent. It is probably fair to say that the dog that bit me was unlikely to be carrying this disease, however, given the unusual aggression it was showing at the time, I could not take that chance. I could not rely on the word of the handler that the dog was disease free, nor could I rely on the paperwork provided by the owner as he lived in another country with more relaxed health regulations. I chose to be safe by following the 'Post Rabies' protocol.

After talking with fellow Judges since returning to NZ, I am sure that most of us are not protected from rabies or many other diseases common in foreign countries. My advice - If you are travelling overseas judging, research the countries you are going to and get the necessary vaccinations to ensure you stay healthy. Also, check out thoroughly the various health insurers too as some of them do NOT cover these costs. Carefully check the questions asked on your declaration, e.g. don't assume that your interpretation of a non-working trip is the same as the insurer's.

Please, think about what I'm saying, get yourselves protected.

Had I had Rabies vaccinations before I left New Zealand this would have been a series of three injections into the arm over a two-week period and I would have been protected – that simple, and far less stressful!

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