

44-year-old man is first rabies death this year

PUTRAJAYA: A 44-year-old man died from a rabies infection in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, marking the country's first recorded fatality from the disease this year, the Health Minister announced.

Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad (pic) said investigations found that the victim, who died on Feb 25, had no history of animal bites.

However, the victim was fond of feeding strays and kept about 15 dogs, one of which was reported to have died suddenly early last month.

"This case serves as a reminder that rabies infection does not necessarily originate from a bite," Dzulkefly said in a post on X yesterday.

He said infections could also occur through close contact, scratches or when handling the carcass of an infected animal without proper protection.

Dzulkefly stressed the importance of the "One Health" approach, where the health of



humans and animals, as well as the state of the environment, are closely interconnected.

"When one is affected, we are all at risk."

He said that since the rabies outbreak was declared in 2017, a total of 91 cases had been reported with 84 deaths, reflecting an extremely high fatality rate of about 93%.

The minister advised the public to take immediate preventive

measures, including washing bite or scratch wounds with running water and soap.

He said victims were also advised to seek post-exposure prophylaxis treatment immediately. Dzulkefly said pets should be vaccinated annually and people should avoid handling stray animals with unknown vaccination status.

The public should immediately report suspicious animal deaths to the Veterinary Services Department or the local authorities.

Obesity surges among kids

Over 2.8 million schoolchildren in M'sia overweight, report finds

By ARFA YUNUS

arfayunus@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: More than 2.8 million school-aged children in Malaysia are overweight or living with obesity, according to the World Obesity Federation (WOF), raising concerns about a surge in early chronic diseases as the world falls short of targets to curb the crisis.

The group warned that global efforts to halt the rise in childhood obesity have largely failed, with countries now expected to miss the original 2025 target, despite the deadline being extended to 2030.

According to the World Obesity Atlas 2026, released on World Obesity Day on Wednesday, more than 2.85 million Malaysians aged five to 19 were estimated to be overweight or living with obesity in 2025.

If current trends continue, WOF said the number is projected to exceed 3.1 million by 2040, putting more children at risk of serious health conditions typically associated with adults.

"It is not right to condemn a generation to obesity and the chronic, potentially fatal non-communicable diseases that often accompany it."

Johanna Ralston

The report estimates that by 2040, 305,000 Malaysian children could show early signs of hypertension, while 382,000 may develop symptoms linked to cardiovascular disease.

Globally, WOF predicts that by 2040, 507 million children will be overweight, highlighting what it describes as a growing public health failure.

"The increase in childhood obesity worldwide shows we have failed to take seriously a disease that affects one in five children.

"Governments urgently need to

step up prevention and management efforts for children living with overweight and obesity, and ensure they receive the care they need," said WOF chief executive officer Johanna Ralston in a statement on Wednesday.

The South-East Asia region is expected to experience one of the fastest growths in childhood obesity.

WOF projects that by 2040, 40 million children aged five to 19 could be living with obesity in the region, while those with high body mass index may total 101 million.

The Atlas found that global efforts to tackle childhood obesity remain inadequate, with many countries falling short on policies related to prevention, monitoring, screening and treatment.

WOF urged governments to implement stronger measures, including taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages, restrictions on marketing unhealthy food to children, improved school nutrition standards, and better integration of obesity prevention and care within primary healthcare systems.

Ralston said policies that create healthier environments for children are already proven to work.

"We know that taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks and limits on advertising unhealthy food to children work, alongside greater access to physical activity and monitoring that starts in primary care.

"It is not right to condemn a generation to obesity and the chronic, potentially fatal non-communicable diseases that often accompany it," she added.

NCD crisis looms with dietitian shortage

By BENJAMIN LEE
benlkh@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: A serious non-communicable and chronic disease (NCD) problem is looming, with an acute shortage of dietitians at government health clinics nationwide.

Those who suffer from NCDs may not be able to receive a proper evaluation due to time constraints or long periods between checkups, say public healthcare experts and groups.

The shortage could limit dietitians' ability to effectively assess and evaluate each patient's condition, says Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA) president Prof Dr Barakatun Nisak Mohd Yusof.

"Most NCD patients have diet related causes, which is why early nutritional care and education management are so important.

She explained that most first-time dietitian checkups usually take at least 45 minutes to properly gauge the risk of a patient developing an NCD.

Follow-ups and checkups may also need as much time.

"This means a dietitian can only see eight or nine patients a day, leading to long waiting periods of sometimes months.

"We won't be able to track patients' monthly progress, and provide appropriate dietary counselling," she said.

This, Barakatun said, could lead to patients turning to a reliance on short-term medication to suppress or deal with their NCD symptoms.

"NCD medication must be combined with lifestyle modifications under the guidance of a dietitian for permanent improvement of a

patient's health.

"Just relying on medication alone could lead to further complications such as kidney failure, and other NCDs in the long term," she said, adding that NCD medication was also expensive.

With a shortage of healthcare professionals, including dietitians, she said the government should consider investing in enhancing digital e-health services such as tele-consultation, as well as integrating dietitians into multi-disciplinary clinics.

"Basic health assessments can be done by other healthcare experts before patients are passed to dietitians," she added.

Public healthcare specialist Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia said the shortage of dietitians would impair patients' literacy on proper food intake.

She said dietary management was important in the healthcare system and this shortage could reduce the impact of any pharmacological treatment.

The government, she said, should consider giving training to other non-dietitian healthcare professionals on at least the basics of dietary after-treatment.

Universiti Malaya public health expert Prof Dr Sanjay Rampal said the government could have locum dietitians at its clinics.

"The limited access to dietitians is likely due to limited positions rather than the number of registered dietitians. So, having locum positions would help address this shortage," he said.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo said the current dietitian shortage was a



Gap in care: Healthcare specialists are urging the government to consider investing in enhancing digital e-health services such as tele-consultation, as well as integrating dietitians into multi-disciplinary clinics to help address the shortage.

symptom of the government's push to expand services of clinics that has far outpaced the creation and filling of posts.

"This has left primary care teams without the multidisciplinary support they need to effectively help NCD patients.

"The government needs to increase the number of dietitian and allied health posts in primary

care," he said.

On Feb 25, Parliamentary Special Select Committee (PSSC) on Health chairman Suhaizan Kaiat revealed that only 50% of the 1,100 government health clinics nationwide had access to dietitians, with the shortage affecting the country's ability to tackle disease-related malnutrition nationwide.

National care pathway needed to manage rising cases, say experts

PETALING JAYA: Body mass index (BMI) screenings in clinics and schools are identifying overweight Malaysian children, but the lack of structured and treatment means many cases go unmanaged.

Health experts are calling for the development of a national paediatric obesity care pathway.

Dr Moy Foong Ming of Universiti Malaya said BMI screenings are routinely conducted, but there is no automatic referral system for children above the 95th percentile.

"Follow-up often depends on the initiative of individual clinicians, so many overweight children are identified but not actively managed," she said when contacted yesterday.

Moy proposed a national care pathway that includes automatic referrals, multidisciplinary teams at clinics or hospitals, family-based behavioural therapy, and specialised training for primary care providers.

She also recommended broader policy reforms such as mandatory front-of-pack warning labels, expanding the sugar-sweetened beverage tax to include sweetened milk and energy drinks, and banning digital and influencer marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

Nutrition Society of Malaysia president Dr Tee E Siong said that adult obesity is already high nationwide, with prevalence at 54.5%, and warned that projections suggest more than 680,000 children could develop early signs of hypertension and cardiovascular conditions by 2040.

"If these conditions are not treated early, the adult disease burden will rise even further," he added.

Senior consultant paediatrician and adolescent medicine specialist Prof Dr N. Thiyagaraj said doctors are already seeing the consequences.

"I hardly saw children with type 2 diabetes 25 years ago. In the past 15 years, I've seen at least one or two teenagers diagnosed each year," he said, adding that some also suffer from hypertension and hyperlipidaemia.

He warned that obese children face higher risks of diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension and heart disease later in life, while teenage girls with obesity are also at greater risk of early-onset polycystic ovarian syndrome.

Dr Thiyagaraj said prevention must begin at home, with parents shaping healthy habits, ensuring adequate sleep and avoiding overly restrictive or permissive feeding patterns.

Schools should enforce healthy canteen policies, and healthcare providers should routinely monitor children's height and weight, and use motivational interviewing techniques to encourage behaviour change among teenagers.

'TROUBLING ILLEGAL ACTIVITY'

Residents fear for health as metallic odour lingers

KUALA MUJA: In early December 2023, residents of Bukit Selambau, a remote town surrounded by plantations and farmland, were awakened by a fire that gutted three warehouses located in an industrial area here.

The massive sparks shrouded the area in smoke for over four days, leaving thick smoke that filled the air with a foul, metallic odour for nearly a month.

The odour was an indicator of the presence of illegal electronic waste (e-waste) processing plants, a type of business activity that was totally alien among residents of this quiet town.

"Besides plantation estates, this town is also known for the timber and woodwork industry, but the fire uncovered troubling illegal activity in our neighbourhood," said resident Apri Hashim, 64.

"We never had a clue about e-waste, let alone about the processing of it before that.

"All this while, we thought that it was a timber and plywood factory."

Apri, the secretary of a local mosque, said residents had sensed something amiss prior to 2020.

"We had our suspicions even before the (Covid-19) pandemic. The river and air were alarmingly polluted, signalling that something was amiss," he said.

Apri said the incident had sparked concerns and fear among the town's residents.

In January last year, those suspicions were partially vindicated when one of the operators linked to the plants in the industrial area was fined RM20,000 in the Sungai Petani Sessions Court for illegally conducting e-waste processing activities.

It was found that the premises had been operating without proper approval and regulation, confirming long-standing concerns among residents that hazardous recycling was taking place behind the zinc barriers.

However, residents said that despite enforcement action and legal proceedings against several operators, conditions on the ground had shown little improvement.

"If anything, things have worsened. When flash floods happen, the rivers are choked with efflu-

ent from nearby labour quarters, sometimes turning dark with chemicals.

"The metallic stench intensifies at night, especially during rainfall. I think that these operators release chemicals under the cover of darkness and rain to evade detection," said Apri.

Bukit Selambau Umno chief Shukor Badri lamented the lack of effective action from authorities in the aftermath of the fire.

"These unlawful recycling activities result in an excessive influx of waste, leading to widespread littering in the vicinity. The debris obstructs the rivers, causing erosion and had led to the collapse of a small bridge," he said.

"It contributes to flash floods in nearby villages during heavy rain. The floodwaters carry a strange stench, sometimes with froth we cannot identify.

"We're not reaping any economic benefits from these activities. Instead, we're left with strewn rubbish and contaminated air and water."

Shukor also claimed the local government health clinic had recorded a relatively high number of people falling ill, although he could not confirm if they were linked to emissions from the e-waste

“When flash floods happen, the rivers are choked with effluents from nearby labour quarters, sometimes turning dark with chemicals.”

APRI HASHIM

Bukit Selambau resident

plants.

"All I can say is whenever someone in our community coughs incessantly, we end up blaming pollution from the plants."

He called for decisive action to safeguard the welfare of residents and the environment. "The fire years ago was only the tip of the iceberg. I won't be surprised if there are more illegal e-waste recycling activities operating in this area."

Checks by the *New Straits Times* at several industrial premises revealed a mix of seemingly legitimate recycling plants and plywood factories. Many, however, were concealed behind zinc barriers that obscured operations from public view.

Nearby waterways were found littered with plastic waste and what appeared to be chemical residue along the banks. A sharp metallic odour lingered in the air, reinforcing residents' fears over potential environmental hazards.

Lelaki 44 tahun meninggal dunia di Sarawak

PUTRAJAYA - Lelaki warga tempatan berusia 44 tahun dilaporkan meninggal dunia akibat jangkitan rabies di Kota Samarahan, Sarawak pada 25 Februari lalu, menjadikannya kes kematian pertama direkodkan tahun ini.

Menteri Kesihatan, Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad berkata, sejak wabak rabies diisytiharkan pada 2017, sebanyak 91 kes dilaporkan di negara ini dengan 84 daripadanya melibatkan kematian, sekali gus menunjukkan kadar kematian yang amat tinggi sekitar 93 peratus.

Katanya, siasatan mendapati mangsa tidak mempunyai sejarah digigit haiwan, namun gemar memberi makan anjing liar serta memelihara kira-kira 15 ekor anjing, dengan seekor daripadanya dilaporkan mati secara mengejut pada awal Februari.

"Kes ini menjadi peringatan bahawa jangkitan rabies tidak semestinya berpunca daripada gigitan yang jelas," katanya menerusi hantaran di akaun X miliknya pada Khamis.

Dzulkefly berkata, jangkitan juga boleh berlaku melalui sentuhan rapat, cakaran atau ketika mengendalikan bangkai haiwan yang dijangkiti tanpa perlindungan sesuai.

Kes rabies ragut nyawa pertama tahun ini



Kes ini menjadi peringatan bahawa jangkitan rabies tidak semestinya berpunca daripada gigitan yang jelas."

- Dr Dzulkefly

Sehubungan itu, beliau menekankan kepentingan pendekatan *One Health* yang mengiktiraf bahawa kesihatan manusia, haiwan dan persekitaran saling berkait rapat.

"Apabila satu terjejas, kita semua dalam bahaya," katanya.

Pada masa sama, beliau turut menasihatkan orang ramai agar mengambil langkah pencegahan segera termasuk mencuci luka gigitan atau cakaran dengan air mengalir serta sabun sekurang-kurangnya 15 minit.

Mereka juga dinasihat untuk mendapatkan rawatan *Post-Exposure Prophylaxis* (PEP) dengan segera, memastikan haiwan peliharaan divaksin setiap tahun serta mengelakkan mengendalikan haiwan liar yang tidak diketahui status vaksinasi.

Selain itu, orang ramai juga diminta melaporkan kematian haiwan yang mencurigakan kepada Jabatan Perkhidmatan Veterinar (DVS) atau pihak berkuasa tempatan dengan segera. - *Bernama*

INFO: RABIES

APAKAH ITU RABIES?

Rabies adalah penyakit sistem saraf yang disebabkan oleh jangkitan virus *Lyssavirus* yang menyebabkan keradangan otak. Virus ini merebak daripada haiwan terjangkit kepada manusia. Kebiasaannya melalui:

1. Luka gigitan haiwan terjangkit
2. Luka terbuka pada kulit dan daerah mukosa daripada air liur haiwan terjangkit
3. Cairan atau tisu tubuh daripada haiwan terjangkit

GEJALA BERLAKU APABILA VIRUS TELAH MENYERANG SISTEM SARAF PUSAT

1. Keresahan dan kegelisahan
2. Perubahan sikap secara tiba-tiba
3. Kekellruan
4. Ketakutan kepada air
5. Kesukaran menelan
6. Insomnia
7. Lumpuh

TANDA DAN GEJALA RABIES

Pesakit hanya menunjukkan tanda-tanda rabies 20 - 90 hari selepas gigitan haiwan (tempoh pengamatan).

1. Demam
2. Sakit dan lenguh pada tempat gigitan
3. Kelesuan otot badan
4. Sakit kepala

APAKAH TINDAKAN YANG PERLU DIBUAT JIKA ANDA DIGIGIT?

- Segera cuci bahagian tubuh yang digigit dengan sabun dan air mengalir sekurang-kurangnya 15 minit bagi menghilangkan kesan air liur.
- Segera dapatkan rawatan luka di klinik kesihatan/hospital berhampiran.
- Patuhi arahan doktor, sekiranya diperlukan suntikan vaksin anti-rabies mengikut jadual suntikan.

PENCEGAHAN JANGKITAN RABIES

- Jangan mendekati haiwan liar untuk mengurangkan risiko digigit terutamanya kanak-kanak.