

Rabies: 100% Fatal, 100% Preventable

Johannesburg, South Africa, 28 September 2012: In a bid to save thousands of lives, the Department of Health (DoH), Sanofi Pasteur (the vaccines division of Sanofi), and Merial South Africa (the animal Health Division of Sanofi), have partnered with numerous human and animal health organisations worldwide to support World Rabies Day on 28 September, creating awareness that rabies is 100% preventable.

World Rabies Day, the single largest rabies education and outreach initiative, is observed each year in about 135 countries. It aims to educate people about the risk of rabies, to promote global awareness of its prevention, and to mobilise resources to support local rabies prevention programmes. Rabies is a viral disease that attacks the central nervous system. It can be transmitted to animals and humans mainly through a bite, but also through contamination of broken skin or mucous membranes with saliva from an infected animal. Rabies has been reported throughout South Africa and in almost all types of domestic animals and a number of wild animals. However, 99% of cases are transmitted through contact with infected dogs.

“The WHO estimates that more than 55 000 people die each year, more than half of them in Africa, with the most vulnerable being children. Children are likely to suffer multiple bites and scratches due to them being in close contact with dogs and cats, which carry a higher risk of contracting rabies, and are less likely to tell their parents when a bite, lick, or scratch

has occurred” says Jean-Antoine Zinsou, Country Manager, Sanofi Pasteur.

Jean-Antoine Zinsou continues, “If not treated immediately - before the virus reaches the central nervous system and the symptoms of the disease appear - rabies is fatal to both animals and humans. The symptoms in humans include headaches, fever, anxiety, muscle pains, vomiting, paralysis and hydrophobia (fear of water). The symptoms of rabies in animals include behavioural changes such as restlessness, irritability, excitability and shyness.”

“Prevention is better than cure; rabies prevention starts with the animal owner” notes Theunis de Bruyn, Business Unit Manager, Merial South Africa. “We recommend that people vaccinate dogs, cats and any other animal that has regular contact with humans, such as horses.”

Vaccination remains the only effective treatment against rabies and acts by neutralising the virus before it actually reaches the central nervous system. The vaccine can be administered before exposure to the virus (pre-exposure prophylaxis), or immediately after contact with an infected animal (post-exposure prophylaxis). The World Health Organization recommends that pre-exposure vaccination should be promoted for children living in areas where canine rabies is endemic, including South Africa. It is also recommended for people who face increased risk of exposure, such as laboratory staff, vets, animal handlers, game rangers and travellers to high risk areas.