2018 Veterinary Alert #1: Importation of Dogs with Rabies and Canine Distemper Virus into New York City and Surrounding Areas

- Rescue dogs are regularly imported into and through New York City for adoption and for purchase
- Several rescue dogs imported from other countries into or through New York City subsequently developed severe neurologic illness and have been diagnosed with rabies or canine distemper virus (CDV) in recent years
- Consider rabies in any dog imported from a rabies endemic area and which presents with a rapidly progressive neurologic illness within 3 months of arrival
- For current information on rabies and animals testing positive for rabies in NYC, visit www.nyc.gov/health/rabies

Please share with your colleagues in Veterinary Medicine and your staff

February 1, 2018

Dear Veterinary Colleagues,

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) has investigated multiple incidents in which a dog recently imported from a rabies endemic area into or through New York City developed a severe neurologic illness. Three of the dogs were diagnosed with rabies and one with canine distemper virus (CDV). Details from the case investigations are described below. Veterinarians are reminded to consider rabies in any dog which presents with a rapidly progressive neurologic illness within 3 months of arriving from a rabies endemic area. CDV should also be on the differential and appropriate precautions enacted to protect staff and other animals, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and isolation protocols.

CASE 1: On December 20, 2017, a rescue dog imported from Egypt arrived in a NYC airport and was transported to an adopter in another state. The dog was excitable and nippy during transport. The following day the dog was found unresponsive and brought to a veterinary clinic. The veterinarian suspected rabies and euthanized the dog. Specimens submitted for rabies testing were positive. Multiple persons received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis, including a veterinary technician bitten during the euthanasia procedure. The dog had documentation of having received a rabies vaccination within a few days prior to export, suggesting the dog was already infected with rabies at the time of vaccination administration.

Case 2: On March 3, 2017, a rescue dog imported from Egypt arrived in NYC. One of the dogs was noticeably ill prior to the flight but contrary to current import regulations was still allowed entry. Upon arrival the ill dog was brought to a NYC veterinary clinic and found to be emaciated with evidence of a head tilt, clonus, nystagmus and proprioceptive deficits as well as nasal and ocular discharge. Rabies and CDV were the top differentials. CDV testing was positive by PCR and the dog was euthanized. The dog arrived with paperwork indicating it had received a CDV vaccine twice, in October and November 2016. It is not clear whether the paperwork was forged or if the vaccine failed to protect against infection.
CASE 3: On February 2, 2017, a rescue dog imported from Thailand arrived in NYC and was quickly adopted. On March 3, the dog presented to a veterinary clinic with several days of neurologic illness including hypersalivation, difficulty prehending food, head tilt and tremors. The dog bit a veterinarian during the examination. The dog was euthanized due to the severity of illness and suspicion of rabies; however, rabies testing done at the Health Department was negative. Limited additional testing was performed but an alternate diagnosis was not made.

CASE 4: On May 30, 2015, a rescue dog imported from Egypt arrived at a NYC airport where it was cared for by several people from various rescue groups and transported to another state. On June 30 the dog developed hypersalivation, paralysis, and severe hyperesthesia. The dog was euthanized and tested positive for rabies. Eighteen people, including veterinary staff, received rabies postexposure prophylaxis. Subsequent investigation revealed the rabies vaccination certificate used for entry of this dog into the United States had been intentionally falsified.

Dog Importation Regulations
Several agencies oversee the importation of dogs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has regulations intended to prevent the introduction of rabies virus and other communicable diseases into the US. However, enforcement is difficult due to a lack of veterinary personnel at US ports of entry to inspect dogs and their paperwork, as well as a lack of federally funded holding facilities for dogs that do not meet entry requirements. The USDA and New York State also have regulations regarding the importation of animals.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Pet dogs imported into the United States (including service animals) must be:
- Healthy
- Immunized against rabies
  - Although CDC does not require rabies vaccination for importation from a rabies-free country, all US states require rabies vaccination.
  - Dogs never vaccinated must be vaccinated at least 30 days before arrival to be considered current.
  - Puppies must not be vaccinated against rabies before they’re 3 months old, according to the manufacturers’ labels, so a puppy must be at least 4 months old to be imported into the United States.
  - Dogs older than 15 months with an expired rabies vaccination may be imported immediately after booster vaccination, without the need to wait 30 days.
- Accompanied by a current, valid rabies vaccination certificate

Under limited circumstances, CDC may issue an unimmunized dog permit (formerly referred to as a dog confinement agreement) which allows unimmunized dogs into the United States when requested in advance and when certain conditions are met.

United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS)
Oversees Animal Welfare Act. Dogs imported for resale (including adoption) must:
- Be Healthy
- Have been vaccinated for rabies and distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parvovirus, and parainfluenza virus (DHLPP)
- Be at least 6 months of age

The only exception is for dogs imported for research purposes or veterinary treatment. There is no exception for dogs imported by rescue organizations. USDA APHIS also has restrictions on pet and working dogs including collies, shepherds, and other dogs to be used in the handling of livestock that are imported from any
part of the world except Canada, Mexico, and regions of Central America and the West Indies; these dogs may be inspected and quarantined at the port of entry to verify there is no evidence of tapeworm infection.

New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets requires that any dog imported into NY have:

- Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (CVI) issued 30 days or less prior to entry
- Current rabies vaccination for dogs 3 months of age and older
- No evidence of heartworm; heartworm-positive dogs are not allowed to be imported into NYS

Rabies Vaccination for Dogs and Cats in NYC
Maintaining vaccination against rabies is required for all dogs and cats in New York City. Any healthy pet dog or cat that has bitten or otherwise potentially exposed a person to rabies is required to be confined and observed by the owner (in most instances) for 10 days after the bite incident. This is done to determine whether the dog or cat could have been shedding rabies virus at the time of the bite. If the animal remains healthy, rabies post-exposure prophylaxis for the bite victim is not indicated. If the animal becomes ill, it must be evaluated by a veterinarian and the Health Department to determine if the illness is compatible with rabies. If the animal is not currently vaccinated against rabies, vaccination should not occur until after the completion of the 10-day observation period. Animal bites are reportable to the Health Department’s Veterinary Public Health Services Animal Bite Unit.

Additional information about rabies, including summary data for NYC and a downloadable brochure for pet owners, is available on the Health Department website at http://www.nyc.gov/health/rabies.

For more information and to report, call the NYC Department of Health:

Veterinary Public Health Services Animal Bite Unit
(during business hours) 646-364-1799, 646-364-1783
- Report suspect animal rabies cases
- Rabies exposures in pets
- Report animal bites

Bureau of Communicable Disease (during business hours) 347-396-2600
- Human rabies postexposure prophylaxis
- Preexposure vaccination and titer testing

Poison Control Center (for any issues that arise after hours) 212-POISONS (212-764-7667)

As always, we greatly appreciate your partnership and cooperation.

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References

- CDC Importation Regulations https://www.cdc.gov/importation/bringing-an-animal-into-the-united-states/dogs.html
- NYS Import Regulations https://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AI/import_export.html
- Rabies in a Dog Imported from Egypt with a Falsified Rabies Vaccination Certificate — Virginia, 2015 https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6449a2.htm