

LETTER FROM MEXICO CITY



Clamping down on rabies

Mexico's four million
dogs are the subject
of a fervent campaign

by Emil Zubryn

Rabies has long been a problem in Mexico. But when the procession of dog-bite victims seeking protection against hydrophobia reached 200 to 300 patients a day in Mexico City alone, action by the Mexican Department of Health was demanded on all sides.

The first stage has now been completed in a campaign to control animals transmitting the disease, including vaccination of house pets, round-ups of homeless street dogs and a general anti-rabies education campaign. More than 250,000 dogs in Mexico City have been vaccinated.

There are approximately 700,000 dogs in the Mexican capital; the total for the nation reaches 4 million health authorities, in a canine census, discovered that only 10 percent of the animals have responsible owners; another 10 percent are homeless strays, and the balance are dogs who have casual masters who never take care of them when they develop illness or injuries. It is in this latter category that the greatest danger lies.

As a result, rabies has spread to all parts of Mexico. Mexico City, Jalisco and the state of Mexico account for 40 percent of the country's rabid animals, according to the Department of Health.

"The stray dogs are responsible for a major part of the contagious disease," says Dr. Juan Quintanilla of the Soledad Orozco anti-rabies vaccination center in Mexico City. "The only efficient way to combat hydrophobia would be to exterminate all dogs without masters. But when this was proposed we ran into heavy criticism and censure.

"So top efforts now are directed at controlling strays and others having owners on a casual basis."

Vampire bats, in certain rural areas of the country, also have been carriers of rabies to livestock from time to time. Some humans have also been bitten. But according to the Department of Health, 95 percent of Mexico's rabies victims get the disease from dogs. The balance are infected by cats, wild animals or bats.

Because of the public outcry, citizens in urban areas finally are cooperating with authorities in vaccination and control work. Animals are vaccinated for a minimum fee of 5 pesos (40 cents). In the past, citizens created problems by refusing to cooperate with authorities, resentful of anti-rabies bri-

gades invading their neighborhoods, hiding animals against injection. This still is the case in the rural areas of the nation.

Control in Mexico is also hampered by the fact that of the nation's 1,500 veterinarians, more than 500 are concentrated in the Mexico City area, with the balance scattered throughout the republic. Because of this the Department of Health called on Mexico City's 5,000 policemen to cooperate in locating rabid dogs and victims. A total of 48 vaccination centers with 200 workers were set up throughout the city to promote rabies vaccination of dogs, and to treat victims.

The educational drive includes widespread use of posters throughout the city. With house pets mostly under control for the moment in Mexico City, authorities are expanding the campaign to the republic at large, with



Local center treats bite victim.

the goal being vaccination of the entire dog population.

In the current drive, the suburb of Coyoacan, to the south of the metropolis, has been a leader. About 92 percent of its dogs, some 7,000, have been vaccinated. The balance are slowly being rounded up in the patrols of mobile units of the anti-rabies center, which collects around 400 stray dogs a month. The ratio of rabid dogs in these strays is 12 percent, according to veterinarians.

A total of over 30,000 cases of rabies in humans has been the annual toll in Mexico, with a very high percentage fatal. Today, there is hope that as the drive spreads to the hinterlands, the dangers of rabies can be reduced to a minimum.