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PREVENTING THE TRANSMISSION OF RABIES VIRUS AT FLEA MARKETS AND FARMERS' MARKETS

The Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee recommends that Council adopt the recommendation contained in the following report dated December 17, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services.

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to local municipalities for review and to consider whether their by-laws should be amended or developed concerning the sale of animals to reinforce record keeping and pet vaccinations.

2. PURPOSE

This report is prepared in response to the Committee's request for information regarding the sale of birds and animals in flea markets and farmers' markets in relation to public health implications.

3. BACKGROUND

At its meeting on May 1, 2008, the Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee received a correspondence from Hazel McCallion, Mayor, City of Mississauga to the Honourable Chris Bentley, Attorney General, dated March 14, 2008, requesting support for the prohibition of the sale of birds and animals in flea markets and farmers' markets. The health concern related to a puppy sold at Dr. Flea's flea market in the City of Toronto in January 2008 that was found to be rabid. In addition, a prohibited animal (pit bull) under the *Dog Owner's Liability Act*, was sold/purchased at a flea market. In the City of Mississauga, any person who owns or operates a "Pet Shop" must be licensed.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

RABIES TRANSMISSION AT FLEA MARKETS AND FARMERS' MARKETS

Pet owner education and pet vaccination can likely prevent the transmission of the rabies virus from wildlife to domestic animals

Rabies is a potentially fatal disease that affects humans and animals and can be a serious health problem. The most common animals that carry rabies virus are wildlife such as raccoons, bats, skunks, foxes and coyotes. Domestic animals such as cats, dogs and cattle can contract the disease if they are exposed to an infected animal and are not vaccinated. In the Dr. Flea's incident, the puppy became rabid after its mother contracted the disease from a rabid skunk. The mother dog had not been vaccinated against the disease. Pet owner education and pet vaccination can likely prevent the transmission of the rabies virus from wildlife to domestic animals.

Birds do not carry the rabies virus but can potentially carry other diseases

The resolution from the City of Mississauga did not provide supporting evidence regarding the prohibition of the sale of birds. It is known that birds do not carry the rabies virus but can potentially carry other diseases.

There is little evidence to support the incidence of the spread of disease from animals to humans (zoonotic diseases) at flea markets in North America

The Dr. Flea incident is a tragic but unique and rare event. A review of the literature on the link between the sale of animals in North American markets and transmission of zoonotic diseases (diseases which can be spread from animals to humans) does not demonstrate a strong risk. This view is also supported by Dr. Scott Weese, Associate Professor in the Department of Pathobiology at the University of Guelph, Public Health and Zoonotic Disease Microbiologist for the University's Centre for Public Health and Zoonoses and the Chief of Infection Control at the Ontario Veterinary College Teaching Hospital. He indicated there is very little evidence to support the incidence of zoonotic disease transmission associated with flea markets.

Precautions such as hand washing should be taken whenever there is contact between the public and animals to prevent the spread of animal to human diseases

There are also other diseases (e.g. salmonella and campylobacter) that can be transmitted to humans from animals whenever there is contact between animals and humans. There are examples in the literature of disease transmission at special events involving animals (i.e. petting zoos, exhibition venues, and fairs). However, the evidence does not support a

complete ban of animals at these events. Rather, it supports the implementation of a variety of public health strategies to reduce the potential risk of disease transmission (e.g. good personal hygiene, hand washing after contact with animals).

It should be noted that the level of risk of disease transmission from animals to humans can change based on a host of factors such as disease incidence and disease strains. It is pertinent that ongoing surveillance is conducted to monitor disease trends and prompt action taken when the level of risk changes.

Routine public health practices assist in the prevention and control of the transmission of rabies and the spread of animal to human diseases

To assist in the prevention and control of the transmission of rabies, York Region Public Health staff investigate all animal bites and scratches involving human contact, provide education to the public on the importance of vaccinating pets and conduct surveillance of rabies in wild animal populations that have come into contact with humans. The staff also investigate other reportable zoonotic diseases and associated outbreaks. In addition, Public Health staff provide education and resources to daycares, child care facilities, and petting zoos on the importance of public health precautions where there is contact between the public and animals.

REGULATIONS ON THE SALE AND KEEPING OF ANIMALS

In Ontario, dogs and cats over three months of age must be vaccinated against rabies

In Ontario, every owner having the care and custody of a dog or cat three months of age or over are required to vaccinate their pets against rabies (*R.R.O. 1990, Regulation 567*). Local municipalities are the primary agencies involved in licensing and regulating the sale of animal activities and help facilitate the observation of the legislation.

York Region municipalities have varying by-laws regulating the sale and keeping of animals

In York Region, local municipalities have varying by-laws that make reference to the sale of animals in flea markets, farmers' markets, pet stores, kennels and private residences. All local municipalities have by-laws regulating the keeping of animals, most restricting residents from keeping "exotic" animals as pets (e.g. elephants, marsupials, snakes). A majority of municipalities have a licensing program for all dogs and cats. However, not all municipalities have licensing requirements for pet shops and kennels as well as regulations on the sale of animals at flea markets and farmers' market.

At least four York Region municipalities have farmers' markets and one has a flea market

Of the nine local municipalities, at least four have farmers' markets and one has a flea market. Only the Town of Aurora prohibits the sale of live animals at farmers' markets; none of the other local municipalities have by-laws restricting the sale of animals at flea markets and farmers' markets. The Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville has a flea market known to sell livestock such as chickens, ducks, rabbits and birds (i.e. pigeons, quails); pigs, dogs and cats are believed to be sold on an irregular basis.

Federal and provincial regulating bodies oversee the sale of livestock

Livestock sold at markets are subject to regulation by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, in which the Ministry of Natural Resources provides surveillance and enforcement.

Support for the resolution from the City of Mississauga is mixed and varied

In response to an inquiry from the Region of Peel regarding rabies control, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care showed no support on any activities around the amendment of provincial regulation on the sale of animals due to the effort/cost required for amendments to regulations with very minor improvement to public health protection.

At its Council on August 11, 2008, the Town of Georgina passed a motion not supporting the City of Mississauga's current position; however, its Council supported regulating activities that require vendors at flea markets and farmer's markets to be registered. At the time this report was being prepared, other municipalities in Simcoe, Durham and Peel do not have by-laws restricting the sale of animals in flea markets and farmers' markets. Although some municipalities are considering the City of Mississauga's proposal, no other regional by-laws are being considered.

Rather than a complete ban, regulations can be put in place to control activities on the sale of animals in local municipalities

Prohibiting the sale of birds and animals at flea markets and farmers' markets could negatively impact on agricultural and farming communities, the livelihood of York Region residents who sell live animals at these locations, as well as those who value purchasing live animals for food as part of their cultural and religious practices. It may also drive these sales to unknown locations which could complicate education and surveillance activities. Rather than a complete ban, regulations can be put in place to control activities on the sale of animals in local municipalities.

Local municipalities have the ability to reinforce vaccination of dogs and cats as well as record keeping on the sale and purchase of all animals

Municipalities have the ability to reinforce pet vaccination (i.e. vaccination records of dogs and cats as well as mothers of puppies and kittens under three months of age) through licensing and regulating the activities on the sale of animals in pet shops, kennels, flea markets and farmers' markets within their local municipalities. In addition, licensing and regulation requirements can reinforce record keeping regarding the sale and purchase of all animals which can facilitate investigation should an incident or outbreak of a reportable zoonotic disease occur. Public education of the by-laws can also increase awareness and encourage consumers to obtain vaccination history of the mothers of puppies and kittens under three months of age prior to purchase.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Reviewing and drafting by-laws concerning the licensing and regulation of the sale of animals in local municipalities could increase workload of local municipal by-law enforcement officers who would be required to ensure compliance.

7. CONCLUSION

Current public health evidence does not warrant prohibition measures on the sale of birds and animals in flea markets and farmers' market at this point and therefore the Community and Health Services Department does not recommend such a ban at this time. However, ongoing public health surveillance will continue to monitor level of risks and respond to emerging trends, as appropriate.

Instead, the Community and Health Services Department recommends that local municipalities review and consider whether their by-laws should be amended or developed concerning the sale of animals to facilitate pet vaccination and record keeping of the sale and purchase of animals. Vaccination and education can assist in preventing transmission of rabies from animals to humans. In the event of a reportable zoonotic disease incident or outbreak, good record keeping can facilitate the investigation process. York Region Public Health staff are available to provide consultation and resources.

For more information on this report, please contact Dr. Karim Kurji, Medical Officer of Health at Ext. 4012.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.