

Nine Years On: A Veterinarian's Frontline View of Sarawak's Rabies Outbreak

Personal reflections of a private veterinary practitioner in Kuching, 2017–2026

Since the outbreak began in 2017, 94 people in Sarawak have contracted rabies and 87 have died (NST, 31/8/26). Between 2017 and 2025, 4,912 animal samples were tested, of which 1,221 tested positive — 125 in cats and the rest in dogs (DVS, 2/5/26). Behind these figures lies the day-to-day experience of the private veterinarians who worked through the crisis.

How it began

In early July 2017, a WhatsApp message from a pediatrician reporting a confirmed rabies case was met with disbelief — Sarawak was then considered rabies-free. The Medical Department soon confirmed the worst: on 4 July, two siblings in Serian Division tested positive, and a seven-year-old died on 13 July, followed four days later by a five-year-old. As the disease spread from Serian, on the border with Kalimantan, to Kuching and eventually the rest of Sarawak, anxious owners moved dogs out of Serian into the city, while authorities scrambled to contain an outbreak that quickly outran expectations.

Vaccines in short supply

Human rabies vaccine was scarce and prioritized for frontline and government workers, leaving private vets anxious as the threat drew closer. Supply eventually reached private clinics with help from the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS), but shortages of dog vaccine triggered panic among pet owners. Clinics were inundated — phones ringing constantly, waiting rooms packed — crowding out other essential services, with each new human death triggering a fresh surge in demand.

A united response

Private veterinarians volunteered alongside government efforts, running vaccination drives and public education sessions in schools, town halls and at roadshows. The Sarawak Veterinary Association mobilized its members to support the wider vaccination and awareness campaign, and with support from DVS and vaccine suppliers, clinics delivered free or subsidized rabies vaccination and neutering.

Diagnosis then and now

In the early years, confirmation relied solely on the Sarawak Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (SVDL), which required euthanasia and brain sampling — a process that drew resistance from dog rescuers fearing mass culling of strays. Clinical signs ranged from classical aggression and neurological symptoms to subtle behavioral change, including a “dumb” form seen in cats, and some vets faced the unnerving experience of handling subclinical or non-specific cases that turned out to be rabies. Today, clinics use UNIMAS's RT-LAMP rapid bedside screening of saliva swabs, with confirmatory Direct Fluorescent Antibody Test (DFAT) at the SVDL delivering results within 24 hours; some clinics also keep commercial rabies rapid test kits for quick screening of suspicious cases.

A lasting vigilance

What was once an occupational hazard taken lightly is now treated with real caution — any bite or scratch means post-exposure rabies immunization, and clinic staff are protected through annual vaccination and prompt wound care. Case numbers have fallen slightly since the early years, but positive cases still surface in hot spots, and rabies remains part of the standard differential for any dog or cat presenting with neurological or behavioral changes.

Looking ahead

Nearly a decade on, the threat of rabies has not disappeared, and we must remain vigilant. Restoring Sarawak's rabies-free status will take sustained public awareness, responsible pet ownership, and firm control of strays and cross-border movement — a goal achievable only through continued collaboration between the public, government agencies, private veterinarians, vaccine suppliers, the media, and all relevant parties.

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