

## Letter from Chennai

### STRAY DOGS

The Supreme Court has spoken. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 and the Animal Birth Control Rules of 2023 are the current rules governing the response of citizens and authorities to stray dogs, and according to these stray dogs may not be killed. Local authorities should keep them off the streets, house them in suitable shelters and provide them adequate food. I am reminded of the problem of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. The point is that there is not enough money to hire sufficient people to catch all the dogs or to house all of them in humane conditions off the streets. The Corporation catches a few dogs and sterilises them, but not enough numbers to keep their population down. So the dogs increase and multiply, and, as we see in Chennai, they revert to a wild state, form packs, and often attack humans. Children are particularly vulnerable, and can be mauled, sometimes badly enough to lose their lives.

The general council of the Greater Chennai Corporation met recently and discussed a major plan to take care of this menace. The approach will be to sterilise all the stray dogs by doing 50 000 animal birth control procedures every year. The proposal was detailed at a recent meeting, and includes two new centres, 11 veterinarians, 94 attenders, 9 security guards, 14 dog catchers, 7 new dog catching vehicles with 7 drivers, and all the necessary equipment and supplies. Along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Blue Cross and the existing centres, Chennai will perform 210 animal birth control procedures per day, and even allowing for holidays the annual target will be met. Just as the Family Planning programme has managed to bring the human birth rate below the replacement level in the southern states, the animal birth control programme should ultimately reach a level when the dog population will begin to decrease. How long will that take? We will have to wait and see. In the meantime, will sterilized dogs not form feral packs and attack humans, with the elderly and children being particular targets?

The Supreme Court passed strictures against people who advocate culling street dogs. I confess I remain one of them. I believe there should be no stray dogs on the streets. Dogs should exist as pets in houses, or as working animals belonging to a responsible owner, and nowhere else.

### *Problem dogs in the IIT*

A couple of centuries ago, there was a forest just to the south of the city, known as the Guindy Reserve Forest. (It still exists, but the city has grown all round it and it is now enclosed within the city.) The British Governors of Madras lived in the heart of the city, around 3 km south of Fort St. George. One of the Governors, William Langhorne, decided the city was too crowded for him, and he encroached on the forest in the 1870s to build Guindy Lodge, which thereafter became the residence of the Governor. Today it is our Raj Bhavan. After Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru was determined to make India an industrialized country, and set up Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) in various cities, each with collaboration of an industrialized nation. The Madras Institute was established with German expertise in 1959 and 630 acres of the Guindy Reserve Forest were given to the IIT. The Institute buildings, student hostels,

and staff quarters were constructed in this area, but as much as possible of the forest was left untouched. Deer roam free in the IIT campus, and are often attacked by stray dogs, so we human residents of Chennai are not the only victims of these animals. More than 50 deer die every year. Post-mortem studies have been done on some of the deer carcasses and suggest that while some deaths are due to diseases such as tuberculosis, a fair number are due to dog bites. The IIT enclosed an area and impounded as many of the dogs as they could catch. The dogs were fed and adequately looked after. Presumably they could also be sterilized in course of time, and the deer were safe from them.

Unfortunately, the IIT found itself in an unwinnable situation. A group of animal lovers filed a suit against the IIT demanding that it stop confining the dogs. If the dogs cannot be confined, they would continue to attack the deer and wild-life enthusiasts would be unhappy. A group of them said it is clear that the IIT is not a suitable place to harbour deer, and should keep its grounds free of them. Since these grounds are a part of a reserve forest, that would entail fencing in the IIT campus and evicting all the deer from this place. Maintenance of the fence would be a difficult task.

Meanwhile another problem has arisen. The only motor cars on the campus are those of the staff and some students, and the occasional visitor. With good roads and no traffic, people tend to drive fast, and occasionally hit an unwary deer. One was recently killed by a motorist. The authorities decided that at least this one hazard to wildlife could be controlled. From 4 September 2024, the speed limit was reduced from 30 km per hour to 20 km. Exceeding this limit will incur a fine of ₹10 000. A second violation will altogether debar the vehicle from entering the campus. If any wildlife is injured by the speeding vehicle, the vehicle will be seized, the driver would be fined ₹100 000, and the vehicle would be handed over to the Wildlife Warden of Guindy National Park. What he would do with it is not defined. These rules will be publicised at the entrances to the campus.

### UNEASY SITS THE BODY WITHOUT A HEAD

I spent a number of years in the major medical colleges of Madras at the start of my career, as a student, houseman, demonstrator, postgraduate student and Assistant Professor, before I moved into the private sector. There were occasions when I had to deal with (more truthfully, be dealt with by) the bureaucracy. The larger teaching hospitals had a Dean, who was the administrative head of the hospital and the medical college, and a Vice Principal (VP), who was his deputy in the college. By and large, the Dean ran the hospital and the VP ran the college, and we went to the appropriate person for our problems depending on which aspect of our duties was involved. It soon became apparent to me, and to every one of my colleagues, that the person we actually needed to deal with was the superintendent of the office. If we needed to find out whether something we wanted to do was within or in infringement of the rules, the Dean or the VP was as ignorant of the rules as we were. If the superintendent was on leave, our matter would have to wait till he returned.

Some months ago, Mr R. Kalamohan, President of the Tamil Nadu Medical Department Direct Assistant Association,

complained to the newspapers that numerous functions including 'timely procurement of medicines, preparation of proposals for medical equipment, filing of responses to Right to Information petitions, and maintenance of medical records, among other works' were held up because of a serious shortage of office superintendents (OS) in the medical, health and medical education departments. The problem is that while the normal career path to become an OS is to start at the bottom and work your way up, it is also possible for direct recruitment to take place through an examination, bringing in candidates at one level below that of OS. Both streams are eligible to be promoted as OS, but the question of which OS would be senior arose, and the matter is in the courts of law. It seems obvious that the next in seniority should act as the OS till the court decides the matter. He or she must already have the competence necessary for the job. Promotion to the post of OS will not suddenly lead to a revelation that makes the person fit to occupy that chair.

#### MEDICAL TEXTBOOKS IN TAMIL

The Dravidian parties that have ruled Tamil Nadu for the past 6 decades have always been keen on promoting the Tamil language. Many school students in Tamil Nadu are educated in the Tamil medium, and are at a disadvantage when they enter professional colleges and find all the standard textbooks are written in English. The Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation has taken up the task of translating many

standard medical textbooks into Tamil, and publishing them for the benefit of those students who have difficulty in understanding the English language. The university still conducts examinations in the English language, but having a copy of the standard textbook in their own language will certainly help students to grasp the subject. It is important that this does not remain a one-time exercise. All subsequent editions of the books must be translated as soon as they are published and made available to our students.

I have always stressed to my students that obtaining a degree is not the culmination of their studies but only the beginning, and they need to keep reading to maintain their knowledge intact and to learn still more. It will never be possible to translate all the literature including so many journals in each discipline, and so the student must also improve his or her knowledge of the English language. Perhaps some books, fiction or non-fiction, should also be prescribed that will help the student to get more familiar with the language while imbibing higher values.<sup>1</sup>

#### REFERENCE

- 1 Mani MK. The humanities in medicine. *Indian J Med Ethics* 2013;**10**:126-7.

M.K. MANI

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