

Letter from Chennai

MAN'S BEST FRIEND?

The population of stray dogs in Chennai has been estimated to be 185 000, against just 3000 licensed pets. I am not sure how the former figure was arrived at, and who carried out the census, but it is quoted in a Wikipedia article. In years past, the corporation dog van would drive around the city and pick up stray dogs. They would be kept in a pound for a few days and if no one claimed them they would be destroyed. Animal lovers in the city pressurized the corporation to change its policy, and for several years now stray dogs are trapped, neutered, vaccinated against rabies, and released again, following the guidelines laid down by the Animal Welfare Board of India. And therein lies the problem. Along with many other functions of our corporation, this is only sporadically carried out, and the numbers of stray dogs seems to be increasing. Another sporadic activity of the corporation is the clearing of garbage. Piles of garbage at most street corners provide a rich supply of food for our canine population, and the dogs thrive. They join together in packs and take over the streets.

A large number of us, whether on medical advice or from a genuine desire to exercise, walk the streets of Chennai, especially in the early morning before the sun and the traffic become aggressive. However, this is not too early for the dogs, and they often attack human intruders into areas that they regard as their own. Some people have been seriously injured. I have been forced to change my route, though I resent being dictated to by a dog. Discretion is the better part of valour. Not everyone has the option of walking down a different road. People who live on the streets favoured by canines have to walk through them. Two-wheeler riders have a more difficult time as dogs particularly like to chase them. They often jump on the motorcycle or bite the legs of the rider, and have been the cause of many accidents. A pillion rider died a few weeks ago when a dog attacked a scooter and she fell off. We still have cases of rabies in the city, which simply should not occur in any proper urban area.

There are other serious problems. Every government hospital has its own population of dogs, cats and rats, and there are stray incidents of newborn babies being mauled.

My alma mater, the Madras Christian College (MCC), and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) differ from all other colleges in the city in having a vast campus. The MCC was established in the heart of the city's business district in 1837 as a school, which was upgraded to a college in 1865. The school also continued on the same premises. There were no playgrounds, and the institution had to borrow the grounds of the Madras Law College not far away for athletics and sports activities, which we could indulge in only when the Law College allowed.

The suburban railway line was established up to what was then a distant suburb, Tambaram, in the 1930s. With admirable foresight, the MCC authorities acquired 400 acres of the Selaiyur forest near the Tambaram station and moved the college there in 1937. While there are extensive buildings and play grounds, there is enough of forested land left over for herds of deer. Unfortunately, Tambaram is no better than the rest of the city in civic services, and abounds in stray dogs that enter the campus. As a privileged government-run institution, the IIT also received a large chunk of the Guindy forest which stretches from our Raj Bhavan, and that too hosts deer, and stray dogs from the areas around. These dogs have been

hunting and killing some of the deer. Worse, five years ago two students of the MCC found a couple of stray pups and played with them. Both of them were bitten. They received anti tetanus shots. One of them also took anti-rabies vaccine, the other, and his parents, felt there was no need for that precaution, as the biter was 'only a puppy'. Three months later, the boy developed rabies and died.

An official of the Chennai Corporation, in an interview to the *Hindu* newspaper, said that the corporation has 15 dog vans and employs 50 dog catchers. He said 80–100 dogs are caught every day, sterilized and vaccinated, and returned to the same place from which they were caught. He said that is strictly according to the law.

What should be done? Sterilization and vaccination of the entire canine population of the city seems the only way to satisfy animal lovers, but the practical solution seems to be to cull large numbers of the animals and get the rest adopted by animal lovers so that they can be kept off the roads and the few forested areas in and around the city. I am a dog lover myself, but I would not sacrifice human life and health for any animal.

RESPECT THE AGED

The Tamil Nadu Medical Council (TNMC) announced that all doctors should renew their registration every 5 years. Since a drive was conducted to re-register all doctors 5 years ago, the TNMC says the time has come for all of us to renew our registration. We were called on to submit proof of the academic meetings we had attended in the past 5 years. The marks allotted for delivering a lecture are greater than for listening to one. I had no doubt I had amassed enough credits to ensure my renewal, and settled down to gather the necessary certificates, when my employer informed me that people over the age of 70 had only to submit copies of their previous registration certificates and proof of age, and their renewal would automatically be done.

I am always happy when I am exempted from any irksome task, and gladly abandoned my search for proof of my academic credentials. However, I wonder whether the TNMC is wise to grant us super seniors this exemption. There is no doubt that intellectual functions decline with advancing age, though every now and then one comes across an exception who exemplifies the wisdom that comes with years of experience combined with academic pursuits. The majority of us find a gradual loss of memory at least, and maybe the capacity to think through a difficult problem also leaves us. In the interests of patients who seek the advice of us elders under the impression that age and experience make us better physicians, perhaps the TNMC should impose more stringent requirements on us than on our younger colleagues.

JALLIKATTU AGAIN

Many of you must be tired of my reverting to this subject again and again. I am writing this letter in March, and the jallikattu season of this year is just ending. We would expect the health minister of any state to oppose any activity that jeopardises the health of his constituents, but ours is an ardent protagonist of this killing activity, and breeds jallikattu bulls himself. After I wrote on the subject in 2018, a favourite bull of his, said to have been untamed

in jallikattu over several years, died during a competition when he dashed into a pole as he ran from his tormentors, and suffered a cerebral haemorrhage. The minister lamented that he had lost a son. Should he not make sure that the lives of other sons, both bovine and human, should be safeguarded? I was reminded of this as we had our usual quota of deaths of bulls, bull tamers and spectators this year, besides injuries in thousands. The Supreme Court is preoccupied with other matters, and does not take cognizance of the fact that its directives to ensure that the bulls are treated humanely are being flouted.

MEDICAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AND VIP DUTY

When I was an Assistant Physician at the Government General Hospital decades ago (I resigned from the Tamil Nadu Medical Service in 1973), the Duty Assistant Physician (DAP) at the hospital was expected to cover calls from the Maternity Hospital and the Ophthalmic Hospital, and also calls from the State Guest House. It was not wise to pull him away from the hospital where 70–80 patients were admitted every day, but there was no alternative if a medical emergency arose in a patient in labour or one with a bad gynaecological condition. Having to go to the State Guest House where there were no facilities at all made no sense. It would have been much better to bring the state guest to the hospital and give him VIP treatment there. However, ours (the DAP's) not to reason why. I had to go once to see a minister from a neighbouring state who went into a panic when a friend who visited him at the guest house had a myocardial infarction and had to be rushed to

the hospital. The minister began to feel chest pain half an hour later. After examining him, I did not think it was serious, but said I could do nothing more in the guest house and asked him to come to the hospital for an ECG. In those days we had one ECG machine for the entire hospital and there was no question of taking it out. The minister himself decided later that it was not serious, and did not come for the ECG.

A few days ago, the mother of one of the administrative staff at Raj Bhavan was discharged at request after treatment at the Government General Hospital. She needed non-invasive ventilation at times, and so the hospital administration decided to post a pair of postgraduate students to look after her at home. The students (quite rightly, I think) refused to go to a private house, and the administration threatened disciplinary action against them. They backed down when the student body threatened to go on strike. The staff member in question said he never asked for support from the hospital after his mother was discharged, and had arranged with a private medical practitioner to look after her at home.

People in government service often perform favours for VIPs beyond their ordinary duties. If one of them chooses to go out of his or her way to ingratiate himself or herself with the VIP, it is a personal choice, but deputing a subordinate for private use goes beyond any service rules, and I am glad the student body stood firm.

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