

TRIBULATIONS OF THE LAST MILE

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In Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, the number of cases of dog-mediated human rabies is at its lowest (11 cases in 2015) since the onset of the Regional Program for Rabies Elimination in 1983, a commitment from LAC countries to eliminate dog-mediated rabies coordinated by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Despite minor setbacks, the decline in the number of human cases has been constant since 1983 and the region is now at the tail of the rabies epidemic. While many LAC countries have significantly reduced rabies to a level where it is no longer of significant public health concern, elimination has proven elusive and pockets of the disease remain across the Region. In the 33-year period since 1983 the Region has set and committed to four dates for elimination (1990, 2000, 2012 and 2015). In this paper, we ponder on the multiple causes behind the elusive goal of rabies elimination, such as blanket regional goals oblivious to the large heterogeneity in national rabies capacities and to the multiple uncertainties and biases around the surveillance evidence. We also consider operational limitations due to suboptimal health systems, fixed attitudes and approaches, and contextual forces such as funding shifts that have played an often subtle but critical part in the failure to succeed. Looking ahead to the certain, albeit not yet with a defined date, elimination of dog mediated rabies in the Region, we also review the many challenges and questions that the Region faces at the last mile of the epidemic. Given the advanced position of the Americas in the race towards elimination, our considerations could provide valuable knowledge to other regions pursuing elimination goals.