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NEWS RELEASE

Chile becomes first country in South America validated for eliminating dog-transmitted rabies as a public health problem

Santiago/Washington DC/Geneva, 14 September 2026 -- Chile has become the first country in South America to receive the World Health Organization (WHO) validation for eliminating dog-transmitted rabies as a public health problem. The recognition highlights more than 50 years of progress without a human case of rabies and confirms the country's capacity to prevent transmission from re-emerging.

"I congratulate the government and people of Chile on this historic achievement," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "This validation reflects decades of commitment to protecting communities from rabies and demonstrates the impact of sustained investment in public health. Chile's success offers valuable lessons for countries working to end human deaths from this preventable disease."

The recognition reflects more than five decades of sustained national efforts to interrupt dog-mediated transmission and maintain that achievement through dog vaccination, surveillance and timely access to post-exposure prophylaxis.

"Chile's achievement is a testament to what sustained regional cooperation can accomplish when countries invest in vaccination, surveillance and access to care," said Dr Jarbas Barbosa, WHO Regional Director for the Americas and Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). "It shows that eliminating dog-transmitted rabies is not only possible, but achievable and sustainable when countries work across sectors and maintain the systems needed to protect people and animals."

More than five decades of prevention and surveillance

Rabies is a viral disease that is almost always fatal once clinical symptoms appear. Yet human rabies transmitted by dogs can be prevented through vaccination, effective surveillance and timely access to post-exposure prophylaxis.

Chile's last reported case of human rabies transmitted by dogs occurred in 1972. The achievement followed sustained national efforts to combat the disease through the timely provision of the vaccine to individuals potentially exposed to the rabies virus, typically through bites, scratches, or contact with saliva from infected or suspected rabid dogs.

These efforts were complemented by door-to-door dog vaccination campaigns, targeted dog population management measures, as well as community awareness and education initiatives.

Since then, Chile has maintained its National Rabies Prevention and Control Programme, which includes free mass vaccination campaigns for dogs and cats, epidemiological surveillance, strengthened laboratory diagnostic capacity, monitoring of rabies virus circulation in animals, and timely access to post-exposure prophylaxis.

More recently, Chile has strengthened risk assessment capacities, expanded community-based surveillance and implemented preventive vaccination activities in border areas considered at higher risk of rabies reintroduction.

A rigorous validation process

To achieve WHO validation, Chile had to demonstrate not only the sustained absence of human rabies transmitted by dogs, but also that it maintains robust surveillance, laboratory, vaccination, and response systems capable of preventing the disease from re-emerging.

Chile submitted a technical dossier documenting compliance with WHO's validation criteria. The dossier was reviewed by an independent international group of experts convened by PANAFTOSA/PAHO/WHO, which confirmed that the country had met the internationally established requirements.

A regional success with global lessons

Chile's validation builds on decades of coordinated action across the Americas, which has made the region a global leader in eliminating dog-transmitted rabies. Since 1983, human cases of dog-mediated rabies in the region have fallen by more than 98%, with only a handful of cases reported each year.

Chile's achievement also contributes to the wider regional goal of eliminating dog-transmitted human rabies as part of PAHO's Disease Elimination Initiative, which aims to eliminate more than 30 communicable diseases and related conditions in the Americas by 2030.

The progress made in the Americas stands in contrast to the global picture. Dog-transmitted rabies still causes tens of thousands of deaths each year, primarily in Asia and Africa. Chile's success demonstrates that sustained investment in prevention, surveillance and access to care can bring this deadly but preventable disease to the point of elimination.

It also illustrates the value of the One Health approach, with human, animal and environmental health sectors working together to prevent and control diseases that spread between animals and people.

Notes to editors

WHO validation of the elimination of dog-transmitted rabies

WHO validation recognizes that a country has eliminated dog-transmitted rabies following interruption of rabies transmission in dogs resulting in the absence of human deaths from dog-mediated rabies for at least two years, while demonstrating the capacity to prevent transmission from re-emerging.

Countries must provide rigorous technical evidence of sustained interruption, supported by strong surveillance, laboratory diagnosis, animal vaccination, timely access to post-exposure prophylaxis and preparedness to respond to potential reintroduction.

Validation is based on an independent assessment of the country's dossier against internationally agreed technical criteria and reflects sustained commitment to public health, intersectoral collaboration and the One Health approach.

About rabies and neglected tropical diseases

Rabies is a vaccine-preventable zoonotic disease that is almost invariably fatal once symptoms appear, but deaths can be prevented through timely post-exposure prophylaxis, including wound care, vaccination and, when indicated, rabies immunoglobulin "dog-mediated" and "dog-transmitted" are used interchangeably in this news release to refer to human rabies cases caused by the bite or scratch of an infected dog, which account for up to 99% of all human rabies transmissions globally.

Public education targeting both children and adults on dog behaviour, bite prevention, appropriate actions following a bite or scratch from a potentially rabid animal, and responsible pet ownership are essential components of effective rabies programmes.

Rabies is one of 21 neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), which affect one billion people globally. As of September 2026, 65 countries had eliminated at least one NTD, including seven in the Americas. Chile's validation for rabies marks its second NTD elimination achievement; earlier this year, it was verified by WHO for the elimination of leprosy, becoming the first country in the Americas to achieve this target.

About WHO

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