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Minn. veterinarians giving three-year rabies vaccine every two years

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Spot hates the veterinarian's needle, but responsible owners bring in their dogs for rabies vaccinations as often as their vet suggests.

Many veterinarians say that's every two years, even though the rabies vaccine is active for three years beyond the initial inoculation. That means more business for vets, but it concerns some dog owners who think the too-frequent shots are costly for owners and risky for dogs.

Those concerns prompted the Minnesota Board of Veterinary Medicine in 2011 to strongly recommend that vets follow manufacturers' immunity labels. Some veterinarians stand by the two-year vaccination schedules, however. Now the two women who first raised the issue blame the board for not enforcing its guidance.

"This is an issue of disclosure," said Jane Anderson, a dog breeder who also owns a grooming salon and boarding facility in Hawley, Minn. "That is not taking place, and people do not know that they don't need to get the vaccine every two years."

Anderson and Chris Addington, a breeder from Washington County's Baytown Township who's also a nurse, filed a complaint last month with Attorney General Lori Swanson, stating that the board is not doing its job to ensure vets are following the duration of immunity.

Dr. Julia Wilson, executive director of the Minnesota Board of Veterinary Medicine, refused to talk about the vaccine issue with Whistleblower, citing the current complaint. Dr. John Lawrence, the board's president, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Typically, dogs receive a one-year vaccination and come in the following year for the three-year vaccine.

Before she accepts dogs for grooming, Anderson requires pet owners to bring rabies certificates. She noticed a slew of dogs receiving certificates valid for only two years.

Two years ago, Anderson and Addington called more than 100 clinics and found that many vets were not following the labeled duration of immunity. They brought their findings to the board, which in 2011 found that 39 percent of vets were giving the vaccines more often than manufacturers directed.

In its recommendations, the board said that if a vet chooses to vaccinate more often, the decision should be based on "credible, scientifically-based information." The belief that people would not bring their pets in before the vaccine expired was not a valid reason to vaccinate early. "It's the animal owner's responsibility to ensure that the animal's rabies vaccination status is current," the board said.

Dr. Rodger Barr at Foley Blvd. Animal Hospital in Coon Rapids said he still recommends two-year vaccinations for dogs because he sees more dogs suffering from missed vaccinations than from over-vaccination.

"There are only recommendations out there," Barr said. "There are always conflicting reports out there. We try to stay middle of the road and tailor the situation to the animal."



A dog owner gets her pet vaccinated for rabies at a government clinic in Taipei, Taiwan, Thursday, Aug. 1, 2013. Taiwan has ordered tens of thousands of vaccine doses to protect people against the island's first rabies outbreak in more than 50 years.

Wally Santana, Associated Press - Ap

The board said in its recommendations that certificates should display the labeled duration of immunity, even if the veterinarian recommends more frequent vaccinations.

Foley Blvd. Animal Hospital issued a certificate in December that has a one-year or a three-year check box. On this certificate, someone wrote a "2" over the "1." No box was checked.

Anderson and Addington filed a complaint against Barr with the board for manipulating the rabies certificate. The women said that complaint and others were rejected by the board because they don't have any pets who are treated by those veterinarians.

Dr. Kristen Harris of the Animal Medical Clinic in Minneapolis said the previous owner of her clinic had recommend rabies vaccinations every two years. She recommends the standard three-year vaccine.

"We generally don't want to over-vaccinate," Harris said. "We know three years is an accepted protocol."

Harris said she has heard from colleagues who prefer to vaccinate dogs every two years to ensure there is no gap in rabies protection.

Regardless of their reasons, Harris said, the veterinarians need to be upfront with their customers. "I think you should be honest," Harris said. "You need to tell your clients why you recommend the vaccine every two years."

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