

Inspired by Tragedy: A Physician's Personal Journey to Understanding Rabies

The patient had been feeling tired with no appetite, and his aversion to water was visceral, animal-like. Emergency room personnel recognized the symptoms immediately, but they were helpless to stop the cruel and relentless progression of the world's deadliest infectious disease.^{1,2} They knew the patient's misery would end only with his death, restrained in a hospital bed, saliva foaming around his mouth, his grief-stricken mother at his side.

Joey was only 5 years old when he died of rabies. One of the medical residents attending to the small boy in the hospital in Manila, the Philippines, was a young doctor 10,000 miles from home, training in infectious diseases. His humanitarian work had begun 6 years earlier, when he volunteered with Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, India.

Dr. Stephen Scholand, then a resident at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia in 2000 and inspired by another physician from the Philippines, was granted permission to study at San Lazaro Hospital in Manila as long as he brought back educational materials for his colleagues. The experience was transformative for him, both medically and personally.

"I was changed," recalls Dr. Scholand, now a hospitalist and infectious disease specialist practicing in Connecticut. **"Rabies doesn't give you any second chances. It causes unbelievable suffering."**

Dr. Scholand is lending his expertise to the Rabies Consortium, a panel of experts formed by Grifols, a plasma therapeutics company, to raise awareness and educate healthcare professionals about rabies prevention and postexposure prophylaxis guidelines. Dr. Scholand's personal goals are closely aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of the Rabies Consortium.

While Joey's death so many years ago from rabies was the first Dr. Scholand experienced, it was regrettably not the last. Two or 3 patients with rabies were brought to that Manila hospital each week, all experiencing a fate similar to Joey's.



Dr. Scholand (right) with RNs at San Lazaro hospital.



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These experiences guided the trajectory of Dr. Scholand's career path—to eliminate, or reduce, the horrible outcomes of rabies virus exposure. In 2003, he founded the global nonprofit organization Rabies Free World (www.rabiesfree.org), headquartered in Meriden, Connecticut, which provides education in the Philippines and beyond. The organization has supported San Lazaro's Starfish Palliative Care Program, whose mission is to provide medication and care to ease the suffering of patients with rabies in their final hours.

Dr. Scholand has coauthored more than 30 articles and abstracts dealing with rabies and other infectious diseases. Additionally, he has been called upon for lectures and presentations for healthcare professionals and the veterinary community. He still considers the Philippines his second home, returning for visits whenever he can.

Dr. Scholand notes that the threat of rabies virus exposure is also a serious issue in the US, from direct contact with rabid bats, to encounters with sick stray cats, to an infected raccoon lurking around household trash cans.

"Even in developed countries," Dr. Scholand notes, "we can't be complacent. Rabies remains the world's deadliest infectious disease,^{1,2} but death is preventable with education, training, and timely and appropriate treatment."

All information in this article was provided by Stephen Scholand, MD, in a personal interview in January 2015.

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For more information, go to www.rabieswatch.com

References

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