



Avian Medicine Today: Setting the Standards

Excerpts from an article by Brian L. Speer, DVM¹ that originally appeared in the *Supplement to Compendium on Continuing Education for the Practicing Veterinarian*, Vol. 25, No. 3(A): 2003:21-31.

Within the class Aves, there are 28 orders, 163 families, 1,975 genera and approximately 8,805 species. Birds are a truly diverse group of animal in many respects. The order Psittaciformes is represented by 80 genera and approximately 360 different species. Most pet birds seen in companion animal practice worldwide originate from this group of birds. There is immense variation among the species and subspecies of parrots. A bird, in the sense, is simply not "just a bird."

The role of veterinary medicine in the care and husbandry of captive nondomestic bird species has evolved dramatically over the past 40 years. Avian medicine continues to change and evolve as a result of an increased societal awareness of birds and an increasing desire to share our lives with them in some manner. The pet bird as a true member of the family is emerging as a more significant portion of companion bird practice as opposed to the caged bird of the past. The general nutritional status for birds has improved with the increased use of formulated diets. Preventive health care has improved in veterinary practices with more diagnostic tests, more treatments, and earlier clinical diagnoses being available than ever before. In mature veterinary practices that provide care for pet birds, clinical patterns of diagnosed conditions are shifting from infectious diseases toward metabolic, neoplastic and behavioral disorders.

"In the newer standard of avian health care, pathogen *awareness* continues to slowly supplant pathogen *paranoia* as a driving force for preventive health maintenance."

-Brian Speer, DVM

Bird Keeping in the United States and Avian Species Health Care

The popularity of aviculture and caged bird keeping in the United States followed general trends established in Europe. Canaries were among the most popular caged birds in the United States in the 1920's and 1930's. The care, treatment, and propagation of birds in aviculture has basically developed in the complete absence of specific veterinary attention until relatively recently. The first professional veterinary journal dedicated to the subject of avian species, *The Journal of Avian Diseases*, began in 1957. Canaries and parakeets were first mentioned in *The Journal* in an article on Salmonella in 1962. Veterinarians were formally given responsibility for the diagnosis and treatment of avian species in 1960, when California finally included pet birds in the Veterinary Practice Act. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was organized in 1980, providing a forum for informational exchange and advancement for those veterinarians interested in medicine and surgery of bird species. The American Board of Veterinary Practitioners established a specialty division in avian practice in 1993, as did the European and Australian Colleges of Avian Medicine and Surgery. No other species specialty has developed in such a manner and in such a short span as has avian medicine.

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Thinking Ahead: Setting the Standards for Avian Medicine and Ourselves

In Spite of our attraction to these animals, in reality, many of us in practice are often frustrated. Death and disease of these wonderful animals is still quite frequently tied into poor education on the part of the owners, unintentional neglect, malnutrition, and a lack veterinary attention until disease and imminent death is apparent. We cannot forget, however, to look at birds in the not-too-distant past. The potential for improved husbandry, preventive care, nutrition, and survival is better now than it ever has been.

Laboratory Testing

Realistically, there are no "psittacosis tests" or "aspergillosis tests." These diseases are clinical diagnoses, not single test results. In most circumstances an emphasis on tests rather than wellness is clearly an incorrect approach to preventive health management. The quality of medical practice delivery has never been defined by the number of tests performed but rather by the clinical application of appropriate diagnostics in a clinical setting consistent with the variables at play at the time. True preventive health management of the companion bird is achieved through a combination of variables. A management practice based on the collection of laboratory tests, repeated annually, does not constitute preventive health maintenance, nor does the annual application of a series of vaccines. On the reverse side, crisis-intervention medicine, where we address problems

only as they are presented to us, is clearly an incomplete approach.

Pathogen Awareness, Not Pathogen Paranoia

The world is full of known pathogens and potential pathogens and this reality will not change. Preventive health management of companion birds should not focus on testing for and treatment of infectious pathogens but on the management of the interaction of agent, host and environment to reduce the risk of disease. In the newer standard of avian health care, pathogen awareness continues to slowly supplant pathogen paranoia in management theory and application.

Focus on Prevention

Most pet bird owners will not initially contact their veterinarian to establish a preventive health care program. Instead, initial client contact is more often to address an immediate problem or concern. The challenge in building a preventive health program is to help clients address their immediate concerns and ultimately shift the focus to *prevention* in place of *crisis intervention*. A more balanced approach to true wellness includes behavioral evaluation, modification and exercises for bird and owner...helping clients get as much as possible from their relationships with their birds!