

**BIRD CARE & CONSERVATION SOCIETY**

**CARING FOR WILD BIRDS IN CAPTIVITY SERIES  
(ADELAIDE AND ENVIRONS)**

**ZOONOTIC DISEASES  
(animal diseases)  
AS THEY AFFECT THOSE WHO CARE FOR BIRDS**

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## 1. Quarantine and Hygiene

- It is important that you treat all newly rescued birds with suspicion. Trauma often releases diseases that, until the trauma, were present but did not trouble the bird.
- You need to quarantine the bird and yourself. Obviously it will not be possible to quarantine yourself totally, so you ought to take other precautions. Make sure you have items such as rubber gloves and face masks in your kit - and use them!
  - Keep all instruments clean and in an enclosed container.
- Properly dispose of old newspapers and cardboard from floors of cages, and use a bleach such as White King, when cleaning re-useable towels and cloths.

## 2. Trauma

- Don't let the birds' beaks, wings, or feet damage you! Know your bird! What does the bird have, that can cause you damage? Is it the beak or the knife-like talons? Think of those species that stab at their food. Terns, cormorants, penguins, herons, etc! Don't forget that a heron can suddenly stretch out a distance of a full metre, and that a pelican has a vicious hook on the end of its bill. We all know that raptors initiate a kill with their talons, but don't forget that wattle birds can grip with very sharp toenails, and spur-wing plovers have exactly what their name implies.

*These are just a few examples of what can damage the carer .*

- Watch your hands, fingers and eyes. Be aware of the methods of handling - gloves towels, restraints. Take the same precautions when you treat the bird, as you do when you first get it.
- When you first get a bird which is presented to you in a box, never take the caller's word for the species. An owl could mean a tawny frog mouth that is relatively easy to handle or a boobook, they are notoriously ungrateful and will probably slash you badly!
- Always cover any open cuts or sores on your hands before you handle wild birds. If the bird caused the cut, stop and treat yourself before continuing with the bird.

## 3. Allergies

- If you suffer from allergies, you may not be a suitable candidate to be handling and treating birds - factors such as feather dander, lice, mites, aviary dust, and bird droppings can cause skin irritations or asthma - like symptoms. How well do you react to anti-histamines?
- " Bird Breeders' Lung" is a widely recognised disorder and it can result in coughing, loss of weight fever and respiratory difficulties. Cleanliness in the aviaries, and damping down (to reduce dust), are sensible precautions.

## 4. Ecto Parasites

- Creatures to look out for are Hippoboscid (the flat fly), mites and ticks. They vary according to the type of bird and the simplest treatment is probably a mini pest strip.

## 5. Zoonoses (The range of infectious diseases that humans can catch from animals)

- With zoonotic diseases, there is a legal obligation to report instances to medical authorities. Some will be **notifiable**, (administered by the state Government), and some will be **quarantinable** giving rise to a need to quarantine people and premises. The last is a Federal Government matter.

*Note: A bird can be a physical carrier without actually having the disease.*

## **Barrier Nursing**

- It is most important to take extreme care in handling wild birds. If the diagnosis is in doubt, isolate the bird and yourself and practice barrier nursing until you have a definite diagnosis. Barrier nursing is interposing a barrier (or several barriers) between yourself and the patient. Wear gloves and face masks, handle with forceps, wear surgical gowns. Don't let affected cages touch others. Keep feeding bowls, towels and cage linings away from others. After infected birds die, ensure that you thoroughly clean cages and aviaries with chlorine bleach.

## **Immunisation**

- It is imperative that you keep your immunisation against tetanus up-to-date.

## **Rickettsial**

### **Chlamydia**

- This was originally called "psittacosis" (parrots) and then "ornithosis" (birds in general), and is caused by the rickettsia *Chlamydia psittaci*. It mainly involves parrots, finches, canaries, pigeons and doves, but other species can be affected. The Dr. Miles survey in Adelaide some years ago, showed the disease to be wide spread in the feral pigeon population - as high as 70%. Many birds appear healthy but they carry the disease in a latent state. However if those birds are placed under stress, such as being injured and taken into care, the disease may be activated.

The organism is excreted in nasal or eye discharges, or in droppings. It may also be carried by mites. Dusty confined conditions associated with transporting and pet shops, can give rise to outbreaks - especially in establishments which stock trapped young parrots and galahs.

The disease is not especially common in humans. It can be contracted after direct or air-borne contact with droppings and aviary dust etc. In the case of clearing roof spaces of bird droppings, workers would be advised to use air line respirators to protect themselves.

Symptoms of the disease include chills, fever, headache, general aches and pains and often an irritating cough. It will be worse in the over 50s and for those with pre-existing respiratory diseases. The incubation period is 10 days and treatment entails a course of medication that lasts 7 or 8 days.

Transmission to other humans is rare. Immunity after contracting the disease is short lived - you can get it again. Venereal chlamydiosis in humans is a related organism (*C. trachomatis*) which does not affect birds.

## **Viral**

### **Ross River Virus**

- A poly arthritis with painful swelling of the joints and a rash. This disease occurs in the North of Australia, but through the combination of mosquitos, water birds, and seasonal factors it can now spread right down to areas close to Adelaide. The original host animals in Carpentaria, and the carrier birds, (all of whom have been bitten by mosquitos) are not affected by the virus. But humans are!

### **Influenza A**

- This also is transmitted by birds, it is one of the viruses that causes influenza in man. It has been known to be carried by migratory waterfowl. Such carrier birds could fly into reserves or wildlife parks and pose a slight health risk to humans. The symptoms are typically those of influenza - headache, fever, muscular aches and pains, lassitude.

### **Newcastle disease (*Paramyxovirus*)**

- Can be found in game birds, chickens, raptors, pigeons and parrots. Transmission amongst birds is by infected droplets. Symptoms include eye irritation, respiratory difficulties, gastric and general illness,

fits and nervous disorders. The virus varies considerably in potency - only the very mild strains are found in Australia at present. The biggest source of danger to our wildlife is through illegally imported parrots.

- It is easily transmitted to humans as an air-borne disease. Symptoms include severe headaches, and conjunctivitis. The incubation period is 1 or 2 days and recovery (with treatment) is spontaneous. Those strains of NVD at present found in Australia, do not appear to cause disease in humans.

## **Bacterial**

### **Salmonellosis (salmonella)**

- A typical method of spreading the disease is illustrated in the case of the Loveday Prisoner of War camp during World War II. The inmates came down with sudden diarrhoea, abdominal pain and fever. The cause was crows feeding on dead sheep. The crows defecated on the roofs of huts, and the bacteria eventually got into the rainwater tanks. Contaminated food is the traditional cause of salmonella. Always wash your hands before preparing food.

Do you wash bird dishes in the kitchen sink where you prepare your meals?

### **Tuberculosis**

- You can become infected by inhalation of the bacteria or by consuming food and water that has become contaminated. Bird droppings are proven sources. *Mycobacterium avium* is only rarely found in humans and its effects are relatively mild form of respiratory disease. *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* from humans can occur in birds, but again, only rarely.

### **Erysipelas (*Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*)**

- Found largely in turkeys, ducks and budgies with eye disease, but is not limited to that list. It can be contracted from the flesh of dead animals or contaminated soil around dead animals. In humans it appears as a generalised illness, with skin lesions and joint disease.

How do you dispose of your dead birds? Don't bury them!

## **Fungal**

- Fungal infections are generally caused by the inhalation of spores. The particular one in relation to birds is aspergillosis. The fungus is present in the debris on aviary floors (eg. mouldy hay) and spores are present in the dust. Symptoms include headaches, visual disturbances, skin lesions and respiratory symptoms

## **Protozoan**

### **Toxoplasmosis**

- This is most dangerous to unborn children (foetus). Women affected in early pregnancy could have babies that are blind or mentally retarded. Adults may be symptomless or only mildly ill. Eating uncooked beef or having contact with infected cat excreta can expose people to the germ.

Hygienically run abattoirs are very low risk but "home kills" where a knife could easily slit an intestine, are potential causes of infections.

Even with dead birds, use gloves when handling, and don't even attempt to do autopsies at home.

## **WHAT YOU SHOULD DO**

1. Always wash your hands after handling birds or cleaning aviaries.
2. Purchase a copy of "Everybird - A Guide to Bird Health" and observe the quarantine precautions outlined on p. 21.
3. Do not do autopsies.
4. Wear disposable gloves, particularly when handling dead birds.
5. Control mites, ticks and insects in aviaries with pest strips or insecticides.
6. Clean regularly. Do not allow dust and debris to build up. Use a face mask and gloves.
7. If you get sick tell your doctor about your birds.