

Interview With a Holistic Vet

by Carolyn Swicegood
Hollywood Beach, FL

Dr. David McCluggage of Boulder, Colorado, is a pioneer in the field of alternative treatment methods for parrots. Dr. McCluggage earned his DVM at Colorado State University. He is a past president of the Association of Avian Veterinarians and is currently the Managing Editor of the Journal of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association and is a member of their Board of Directors. Dr. Dave is in demand as a teacher of other veterinarians who wish to learn alternative treatment modes for parrots and other animals. His advice can be found in "Ask Dr. Dave," a column in *Natural Pet Magazine*, which details holistic care for pets.

Dr. McCluggage's veterinary practice is a combination of allopathic and holistic treatment methods. He says that he has no problem with the use of antibiotics and uses them when needed, but he uses holistic treatments as an adjunct therapy, even in serious diseases in many cases. Through the use of holistic treatments, Dr. McCluggage has kept birds with Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease alive for much longer than they normally would have lived. He uses herbs as anti-viral agents and to kill bacteria in some cases. If a bird is not seriously ill, he may treat it with herbs only.

He says that chronic diseases rarely are successfully cured using conventional allopathic methods. Alternative modalities, including acupuncture, herbal medicine, homeopathy, and nutrition show promise for increasing the success rate in treating these chronic conditions. Doctor Dave says that it matter not whether medicine is old or

new as long as it brings about a cure.

Linda McCluggage assists the doctor in his practice and adds her own personal touch of warmth and care. She not only is knowledgeable about the many alternative treatment methods used at the clinic but is said to have a special "way with animals" that calms and reassures them in crisis situations.

In an excerpt from the AHVMA Conference Proceedings of 1995, Dr. McCluggage said, "Birds are very sensitive, emotional, and intelligent animals. Because of this, they are prone to stress and the detrimental effects of restraint, medications, and many of the more invasive diagnostic or therapeutic modalities employed in conventional practice. It is possible, literally, to stress the patient to death during restraint, physical examinations, and blood collection. The stress associated with any procedure must always be evaluated against the potential benefit to the patient. Birds must always be treated gently and with care during any procedure. Therapeutic decisions are developed after the veterinarian assesses the patient's mental and emotional condition, physical disorders, nutritional status, and environment."

Acupuncture

According to Dr. McCluggage, birds have a high metabolic rate. Many birds have a heart rate of 200 plus, and a high body temperature that often is greater than 103°F. Birds are light and relative-



Drawing by
Susie Christian

ly hollow (their air sac system). This makes them more yang in nature. From an evolutionary view, birds evolved from reptiles and are a younger class than the Class Mammalia. This means that they are "purer" animals than are mammals. This leads to the assumption that they would be more responsive or sensitive to acupuncture techniques. The balance between yin and yang is more readily manipulated with acupuncture, making needling techniques potentially stronger.

Recently, veterinary acupuncture has gained greater acceptance in the veterinary medical community throughout the world. Dr. McCluggage says, "Almost every bird that comes into my health center gets acupuncture treatment first. Most people think that acupuncture is useful only for arthritic problems or pain relief. What is not understood is that acupuncture can work for literally any disease that the body might have. It strengthens the body so that it can fight off the disease process. If a bird presents with a bacterial infection, acupuncture is part of the treatment. If a parrot gets egg bound, acupuncture is effective for that too." Dr. McCluggage does not use regular acupuncture needles. Instead, he gives Vitamin B-12 injections into the acupuncture points. This applies minor irritation and pressure to the

area where the acupuncture point is located. It applies the same kind of stimulus that a needle does. The bird is held in a towel and the points are located and injected. Dr. McCluggage uses needles but does not leave them in. For tonification and sedation techniques, he injects one point for five or ten seconds, pushing the needle in and out, and then he moves on the next point. He likes needles in all situations if at all possible but rarely leaves needles in for any length of time, except in baby birds.

He does *not* use electropuncture on birds and says that a bird's heart can be stopped with electropuncture. He explained that it is difficult to tell how much conductivity there is at an acupuncture point. There are variations in the fluid in the area at different times, so the amount of resistance to the electrical flow varies every day and varies with the placement of the acupuncture needle.

Homeopathy

Doctor Dave says, "In my experience, homeopathy works very well in

birds. Birds are particularly responsive to energetic therapeutics. I practice classical homeopathy, so I must find the correct remedy using not only physical symptoms, but mental and emotional symptoms as well. This can be very much a challenge with birds, since most owners know little about the normal behaviors of their companions, let alone the abnormal mental and emotional symptoms. Each holistic veterinarian must be extremely well acquainted with the western medical examination and diagnosis with their avian patients. Since many birds come to the veterinarian very ill, we may not have a second chance if the first remedy fails. Allopathic medications might be indicated with very sick birds to get them through the crisis point. The veterinary homeopath must also have an in depth understanding of the normal behavior of various species. Only then can we hope to treat accurately.

Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine has been practiced in China for over 5,000 years. There are numerous scientific papers published in China documenting the effectiveness of herbal medicine. Animals respond at least as well, if not better, to traditional Chinese herbal medicine. Dr. McCluggage says that Chinese herbs really are no better than Western herbs, but the Chinese have such an in depth understanding of how they work and how to apply them that they get remarkable results. Dr. McCluggage has found that the combination of acupuncture and herbs can help heal animals of many of the debilitating diseases that Western medicine finds so frustrating.

Clinical Nutrition

Psittacine birds in their natural habitat will consume a variety of food items, including seeds, nuts, grains, sprouts, leaves, insects, and fruits. Some have even been known to consume meat (mice, small birds, and carcasses). Typically, all birds will subsist entirely on one type of food if it is plentiful. When that food source no longer is available, hunger establishes the natural foraging instinct, and the bird will seek out new food sources. When provided free access to seeds,

the foraging instinct is lost, resulting in birds that subsist on totally seed diets. Offering new foods often fails to broaden the diet. The most effective method to alter the diet of the seed addict is to limit the total amount of all of the different food items provided.

Feeding Schedule

Birds should be fed on a twice daily schedule. This technique approximates normal food gathering in the wild and induces birds to sample new food items. Providing access to food throughout the day inhibits the foraging instinct and may produce obesity. For many people, the best routine would be to feed seeds or other dry food items in the morning. Either remove the food cups in one hour or make sure that the bird will consume all the available food early in the day by providing small portions. The evening feeding could include other food items such as vegetables, fruits, eggs, and bits of meat.


Cooking for Birds

As with all life, fresh foods and variety are the cornerstones of good nutrition. The basic diet should consist of a mixture of equal portions of beans, rice, formulated bird diets, seed, and corn. Whole grains, such as quinoa, can be cooked and added to the basic diet. Other items should be added daily, such as green leafy vegetables, sweet potatoes, fruits, and cheeses. It is important not to leave this mix out for more than three or four hours or spoilage may occur. Preparation can be made easier by freezing large batches and thawing daily portions slowly in the refrigerator. As might be expected, high fat foods, salty foods and processed foods should be kept to a minimum.

Pellets

Dr. McCluggage says that the concept of putting everything in a bird's diet into a pellet is absurd and that he does not know how anyone can think that pellets are better than good food. He does use pellets, only organic Harrison's pellets, but as a small part of a total diet. He says, too, that he does not know where we got the idea that

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seed-eating birds should not be given seeds as part of a balanced diet.

Supplements

Dr. McCluggage does not use any supplement on any bird all of the time. A variety of supplements might be indicated depending on the problems seen; these may include herbs, glandulars, enzymes, and minerals. Each supplement has its own characteristics and is useful in different situations. The only thing that he gives his birds on a regular basis is good food. The one supplement that he strongly recommends for all birds is the juice of combinations of fresh vegetables and fruit. For juicing, he recommends choosing those fruits and vegetables that the bird likes. Fresh apple juice is always good, as well as carrot, kale, spinach, and others. The pulp or fiber can be added to a different bowl for the bird to eat. Fiber is important, but it would be difficult for a bird to eat enough fresh foods to supply its optimal nutritional needs. Juices concentrate those nutrients in a tasty liquid that they can drink.

Feather Destruction

Dr. McCluggage prefers "feather grooming abnormalities" as a description of this behavior. It encompasses overpreening, yanking, plucking, and shearing feathers off, all abnormalities of the normal grooming behavior of parrots. For parrot problems relating to behavior, treatment usually begins with acupuncture, which can have a dramatic effect. Doctor Dave said, "We are keeping wild animals in a captive situation and it is not normal for them. In the wild they sometimes may fly 10 miles for a drink of water. They have a lot of work to do — finding nest sites, building and protecting the nest, protecting their mates, defending their territory, and foraging for food.

In captivity no matter how many toys we give them nor how much attention we give them, they have too much time on their hands. Some birds do well in that situation and others do not. Those that do not do well develop behaviors that are annoying to their owners, such as screaming or engaging in abnormal feather grooming, which

becomes a compulsive habit. In captivity, parrots can get angry and irritated at things that we do not understand."

When Dr. McCluggage used only Western medicine, he spent a lot of time looking for underlying physical causes of abnormal feather grooming. He concluded that almost none of the cases were due primarily to disease. He said they were due primarily to behavior problems with secondary manifestations of disease. Many vets will do a skin biopsy or a feather follicle exam

and perhaps find a bacterial infection, but if we scratch our own skin for very long, it too can become infected. Parrots dig at their feathers and get secondary folliculitis, secondary bacterial infection, virulent yeast infections, and various other problems, but all are secondary manifestations due to the primary behavior problem.

Dr. McCluggage treats abnormal feather grooming with acupuncture. Before he started alternative therapy on abnormal feather-grooming birds,



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he says that he had about a ten percent success rate. Now he feels that he strongly, positively helps seventy percent of the birds that he treats. He says that does not mean that they all are miraculously restored to perfect feathering. A typical African Grey Parrot that is either totally bare or a "fuzz ball" will regrow feathers. Afterward, there may be more damage done here and there, especially in circumstances such as sexual cycling, or when caretakers in their view or earshot engage in domestic altercations, but they never go bald again. He says that if you are not completely changing the underlying problem, then you can only treat the external manifestations. For instance, if a bird engages in abnormal feather grooming when his caretakers have loud arguments, all the treatments in the world will not effect a permanent change as long as the caretakers continue to argue, thus upsetting the bird who in turn engages in the compulsive behavior.

Dr. McCluggage has tried many herbal combinations for abnormal feather grooming. He has used St. Johns Wort but was not pleased with the results. He said that it must be used for a long period of time and it does not always get results. He uses combinations of therapies, such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and Chinese herbs, which are gratifying as a treatment mode but complicated and difficult to learn. Another product

that he uses for many problems, such as abnormal feather grooming, is 5 Hydroxyl Tryptophan, or "5HTP," which works like a selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor—supplying more serotonin in the body. He has used it successfully for abnormal feather grooming problems, for birds that engage in fighting, birds that seem unsettled, and for birds that are domineering or insist upon ruling the roost.

There rarely is a bird with allergies, but most bird allergies are manifested in the respiratory system, and very rarely does Dr. McCluggage see allergic reactions on the skin. Although dogs tend to react to allergens with skin problems, the majority of birds show reactions in the respiratory system and, less likely, in the digestive system. Rarely does a bird respond to

the classical prednisone or cortisone type therapy. He has tried them and there was no response.

According to Chinese medicine, adverse emotions negatively impact internal energetic channels of the body. People say things like "vent my spleen," "turns my stomach," "breaks my heart," all terms that relate to emotions that adversely effect the Chinese meridian organ system. Chinese medicine looks at the entire pattern of how an organ works throughout the body. Anger and holding things inside adversely affect the liver. Many birds have a lot of frustration and anger at the things that are going on around them. The effect on their liver is what the Chinese refer to as "stagnated liver chi." When the liver is stagnated, it does not send energy, or "chi" to the other organs of the body. Other organs may then start to become adversely affected. Ultimately, the emotions flare up even more powerfully and negatively.

Our human society is afflicted with "stagnated liver chi" too. We all tend not to handle things well and to overreact to things. We react with headaches, digestive problems, skin tingling, and other physical symptoms. People also react with compulsive behaviors, such as overeating or drug abuse in an attempt to escape the negative feeling. Birds get into compulsive preening behavior. That is a superficial look at what stagnated liver chi can do.

There are many acupuncture points that "ensure the smooth flow of liver chi," and the stimulation of these points can break up the stagnation of liver chi. These acupuncture points, called "liver points," are powerful behavior altering points. They calm, and they help with fear, anxieties, and insomnia. They work on the organs that are "plugged up."

Dr. McCluggage has found that acupuncture is a great treatment for feather grooming abnormalities and for other behavior problems.

How it Started for Dr. McCluggage

Dr. McCluggage frequently is asked how and why he became interested in holistic medicine. Several years ago, his wife, Linda, urged him to investigate alternative forms of healing. He initially took a weekend course in

homeopathy because of his frustration that there were so many difficult cases for which he had no solutions. One of his clients owned a 35-year-old Amazon parrot with hepatic lipidosis that he had been working with for many years. One day the owner called and was sobbing that the Amazon was dying on the bottom of the cage. The bird was her only companion because her husband who gave her the bird had died a year earlier, and her son also had died two months earlier. Dr. McCluggage told her that he had been studying homeopathy and would check his books for something helpful.

After reading through his books, he gave the bird a homeopathic remedy even though it was almost dead. Five days later, the owner called to tell the doctor that he was a "miracle worker" because the Amazon was the healthiest that he had been in 10 years! The Amazon now is 45 years old and going strong. So is the holistic practice of Dr. McCluggage.

In the near future, Dr. Dave McCluggage will have a new web site on the internet. He can be reached for consultation at the address and numbers below:

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