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18247 East Valley Blvd.
(at Yorbita Rd.)
La Puente, CA. 91744
213/964-8473

the Vet's Corner

by Ralph Cooper, D.V.M.

Veterinary Laboratory Services
Department of Food and Agriculture
San Gabriel, CA. 91778

PACHECO'S PARROT DISEASE

In late August of 1975, we were presented with a dead Black Mask Lovebird. According to the owner, it was not noticed to be ill prior to its death. A preliminary gross examination revealed nothing out of the ordinary. When the liver was examined microscopically, it was discovered that the nuclei of the liver cells contained inclusion bodies. Inclusion bodies are readily identifiable structures which are produced by some viruses when they act within a cell. We were familiar with similar inclusion bodies in poultry, but it required a search of the literature to reveal the true nature of the disease in the Lovebird. It became clear that this bird had died of Pacheco's Parrot Disease. It had been first described by a trio of Brazilian veterinarians working in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 1930. On that occasion it caused losses among three kinds of Brazilian parrots including the orange wing parrot, the blue fronted parrot, and the mealy parrot. Subsequent experiments showed that the virus would infect and kill the Tui paroquets and the Budgerigars. Nothing more was reported until 1974 when it was diagnosed in Florida. During a single outbreak there, it killed three macaws (one Ara ararauna and two Ara militaris) which had brought the disease from California, and four scarlet macaws and eight cockatoos, which had become infected by contact. Two hornbills and a mynah bird which shared the same room were not affected. In the early 1970's, the disease was reported

in an African Grey parrot in Kenya. Subsequent to our discovery of the disease in the Black Mask Lovebird, we have seen it in a Mustache, a Hooded, and a Black headed parakeet.

In some of the reported cases, the sick bird was thought to have had Psittacosis. In fact, several of them had been started on Chlortetracycline when the first losses occurred. It was only when microscopic examination of livers from dead birds had been completed that the true nature of the problem had been revealed. Most of the time, if the bird was seen to be sick at all prior to death, it only seemed to be lethargic.

Upon autopsy, only rarely were any gross lesions of significance to be seen. Bacterial cultures might reveal the presence of various complicating species, or they might be sterile. In the few cases that were subjected to virus isolation procedures, a herpes virus was isolated with which the disease could be reproduced in experimental birds such as Budgerigars.

My purpose in presenting this brief review of the disease is to alert you to the fact that such a threat exists, and in fact, is more widespread than we had known. Based on the still limited reports of its incidence, it seems clear that many, if not all, of the psittacines are susceptible to this viral disease. To date, there have been no survivors among the infected birds. Inasmuch as this is a true viral disease, we wouldn't expect anti-



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biotic therapy to be effective. There is a suggestion by word of mouth that the outbreak in Florida was arrested by the treatment of the remaining birds using a high level of Aureomycin. This remains to be documented, but would be worth trying if the opportunity presented itself. It seems likely that an infected bird may appear healthy for a time but poses a real threat to other psittacines in contact with it. The time of infection to death seems to be about 12 to 14 days. Had the infected macaws in Florida been isolated for a month before they were placed with the local birds, the serious losses might have been prevented. This underscores our admonition that you never place a newly acquired bird in contact with your collection until it has undergone at least a thirty day quarantine in an isolated part of your premises. To shortcut this advice is to invite disaster. If you should have a psittacine bird die, we would encourage you to take it to your own private veterinarian or to the State laboratory or other facility for diagnosis. If your veterinarian has had only limited experience with birds, it would not be amiss to remind him that Pacheco's Parrot Disease has been diagnosed in numerous species and that its diagnosis is most easily made by microscopic examination of portions of the liver for the typical inclusion bodies. As long as this disease operates in a hidden manner we will continue to suffer the mysterious and damaging losses it can cause.