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# the Vet's Corner

## the Veterinarian and the Import and Sales of Pet Birds

by  
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Pet bird importation is big business in the United States. Approximately 600,000 to 700,000 birds are imported into the United States annually.

In 1983, 803,873 pet birds were legally imported into the U.S. Of these, 40,054 (4.9%) were dead on arrival, 92,768 (12.1% of the live arrivals) died in quarantine and 9,303 (1.15%) were refused entry. After quarantine, 614,782 (76%) were released into the U.S. pet market.<sup>1</sup>

Veterinarians have been involved in pet bird regulatory medicine since the 1930s, when many cases of human Psittacosis were diagnosed. In 1968 a program was initiated to allow importation of birds which were treated with Chlorotetracycline for 45 days in the country of origin. The first major VVND break in 1972 resulted in a temporary ban on all imported pet birds. In 1974 the present quarantine system was established.

The current quarantine system operates as follows. A bond (\$20,000) is posted to cover USDA charges (laboratory charges and USDA personnel charges) and the quarantine station is outfitted, disinfected, and sealed. Import permits are obtained from the USDA. Export permits and CITES (*Congress of International Trade in Endangered Species*) permits are obtained from the country of origin and export taxes are paid. The "wheeling and dealing" required in obtaining the necessary fees often becomes political and marked with intrigue. One experienced importer veterinarian friend of ours has described obtaining the permits in one South American country several times to satisfy several successive changes of governments ("coups"). Each time he would be ready to ship a load of birds, the government would change, necessitating the obtaining of new permits and

paying fees to new officials. Stories abound of payments required of different officials or even relatives of officials to secure passage of successive shipments of birds. Needless to say, the veterinarians involved in this type of work become quite expert at "following the local customs" in dealing with the people in the countries of origin of the birds.

Birds are collected into holding facilities in the countries of origin. Local people are contracted to either trap birds or tap nest sites (some locals are quite scientific, tagging nesting sites and only taking one or two babies from each nest; others are much less conservation minded). In some areas of Africa, for instance, young African Greys are captured and stored in large pits in the ground. Later they are placed in wire cages for a rough ride on horse, or camel, back to a collecting point. In Africa and Central and South America, the classic machete chop (which may "miss") is often used to clip wings. Many of the birds are captive born in the countries of origin.

After the birds are collected, a health certificate must be obtained from a veterinarian in the country of origin. The birds are then flown to the designated port of entry, met by customs, USDI and USDA officials and escorted to the quarantine station. The stress of poor care, bad food, bad water, and sheer terror are usually taking their "toll" by now. Of course, many birds are very well cared for by the people collecting them. Veterinarians working for the large importation companies have played a big role in improving husbandry and health standards of imported birds. However, even under the best conditions, it can be easily seen why disease could take its toll under the conditions of importation.

Continued on page 12

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The birds are then placed in quarantine stations. All psittacines have an identifying approved metal leg band applied. The feeding of 1% chlorotetracycline is required but not enforced, leading to variable Psittacosis prevention. The quarantine period is 30 days. It is now known that this time period is not long enough to eliminate the Psittacosis carrier state in many species of Psittacines (notably Macaws), anyway. Those trying to comply with the chlorotetracycline regimen may find the birds won't eat it well, leading to a weakening of the bird's condition and disease. If the birds do eat the medicated food well, there may be problems with secondary yeast, fungal, or other bacterial infections.

Other requirements in the quarantine station system include the taking of showers on entering the station and in leaving the station. Anyone entering the station must sign an affidavit stating that he/she will not come into contact with any birds for 3 days. This rule effectively eliminates practicing avian veterinarians from taking an active role in helping treat quarantine station birds. Another rule that endangers the birds' health is that samples for analysis of dead birds are not allowed out of the stations except for VVND virus analysis and Avian Influenza examinations.

On entering the quarantine station, tissue swabs are taken and shipped to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa for VVND and poultry lethal forms of Avian Influenza analysis. Tissue samples are submitted from all dead birds (up to 100 per day) in the first 15 days. Brain, lung, spleen, trachea, and colon are collected into brain heart infusion broth. Again, the only examinations made are for VVND and Avian Influenza. Any other deaths are meaningless as far as our system goes as the regulations are set up to protect our poultry industry and not to help the quarantined birds. Cloacal swabs are collected from up to 150 birds on the seventh day of quarantine. On the thirtieth day, the birds are released.

From all of this one can conclude that:

1. The quarantine system does not guarantee a healthy bird. In fact, it often guarantees the opposite, contrary to popular belief.
2. Psittacosis control is not regulated and is semi-voluntary by the individual quarantine station.
3. Over crowding, stress, unfamiliar surroundings and exposure to disease takes its toll on the quarantined birds.
4. The purpose of the quarantine

system is simply to monitor against VVND and Avian Influenza to protect our poultry industry.

5. An average of 24% deaths are to be expected in the quarantine stations.<sup>1</sup>

6. Birds released from quarantine are survivors of a harsh system and often are carriers of abnormal bacterial organisms.

#### Illegal Importation of Pet Birds

Bird smuggling has become big business, particularly in Southern California. The profits to be made are staggering, to say the least. One can buy a young Amazon parrot in Mexico (often dyed by local artisans to resemble a double-yellow headed Amazon, which the locals consider more valuable) for \$10 to \$40 which will eventually be resold for \$400 to \$1000. Birds are brought over by boat, plane, drugged or intoxicated inside automobile interiors, tires, etc. It is said there is more money to be made smuggling parrots than smuggling dope! This is made especially attractive in that the penalties for smuggling birds are minor compared to drugs. In southern California, over 95% of the baby Amazon parrots (large numbers every year) are smuggled birds, despite the owners' claims. Everyone always has a "breeding pair of Amazons" to explain lots of suspect babies. In reality, very little legal Amazon breeding is being done. As a result, the avian veterinarian is presented with a myriad of sick baby parrots with diseases of human contact, poor food, poor water, and stress such as numerous gram negative septicemias, Chlamydiosis, yeasts, infectious Pox, combinations "of the above", etc.

#### Pet Store Medicine

It is estimated that there are over 42 million pet birds in the United States.<sup>1</sup> I think this is a very conservative figure. Large "bird farms" have risen all over America to satisfy the public's need for avian pets. Catering to these pet stores has become a real challenge for the veterinarian.

Pet stores purchase their birds from five sources: 1) quarantine stations, 2) private bird breeders, 3) bird jobbers — buy from quarantine in quantity, 4) smugglers, 5) individual pet owners. The profit margin is borderline due to purchasing costs, upkeep costs (rent, help, supplies, etc.), bird deaths (often as a result of diseases contracted in quarantine or in the bird jobbers' holding facilities), and competition between other stores. *As a result, pet stores, as a rule, try to keep veterinary costs down as much as possible.* As much as we would like to run complete blood

workups, two gram stains, and two cultures and sensitivities on all pet store birds, we usually are allowed only to run a differential, an estimated WBC, and a gram stain on individuals and a culture for a representative group. This is true of most pet outfits we have worked for. The more progressive will budget more for veterinary care but always try to cut corners and do as much treating as they can on their own, of course. The advantages in working with pet stores are the challenge of treating with little lab backup and the *individual* pet referrals you get that you can properly treat. *It is sometimes best to cut corners and do favors to keep the pet store's good will to get the excellent referrals they send you.*

*One problem we have found with pet stores is that you must be very careful in incriminating them with a disease situation. We tell clients the story of the quarantine system and to expect that all new birds will probably have something wrong (the truth) when first purchased (gram negative carrier, etc.). In this way, they are not apt to attack the store for selling them a "sick bird" (unless, of course, there is some flagrant violation). One thing we have learned in practice is that the better you get in diagnosing problems and identifying carriers of disease, the more reluctant the borderline pet suppliers are at referring you newly sold birds. They would much rather send a new bird to an inexperienced veterinarian who eyeballs a bird, performs no tests, and pronounces it "healthy". This person quickly builds "good will" from the store. They are happy with him/her, of course, until he incriminates them with an illness and then they change veterinarians.*

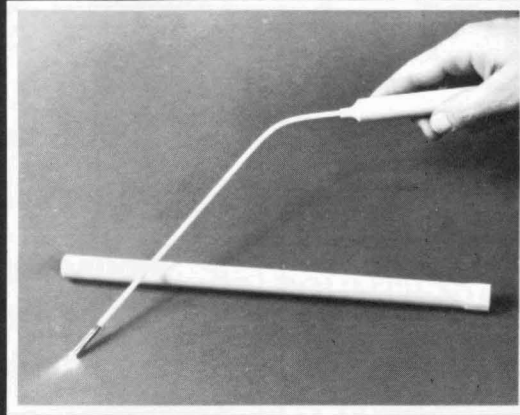
The well established, solid pet distributors understand the value of good veterinary care. These people are a joy to work for. They realize the importance of good husbandry and are willing to work with a veterinarian they trust. They are not devastated if an occasional sick bird is their responsibility.

In summary, it can be seen that the pet avian industry is big business. The veterinarian will continue to play an ever-increasing role in both the importation (in regulatory work or working with an importation company) and sales (providing veterinary care for pet distributors and their clients) of pet birds. ●

#### References:

1. Clubb, Susan: What Really Happens In Quarantine. In the Proceedings of the 1984 International Conference, on Avian Medicine (A.A.V.), Toronto, Canada. pp. 235-236.

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