

# Psittacosis Chlamydia

By: Joe Powers

## What is psittacosis chlamydia?

Psittacosis chlamydia is an airborne, infectious disease, which can be transmitted to humans from birds. While it is best known as a disease seen in the hookbill (parrot, macaw, cockatoo) family (often called parrot fever), it is often found in other birds, and animals. In pigeons we often refer to it as *ornithosis*. *Chlamydia psittaci* is sort of in the middle ground, neither a bacteria, nor a virus. Standing alone like this, it is often hard to diagnose.

## My experiences with psittacosis.

My first contact with psittacosis came after the Lincoln National, back in 1983. Like many that showed there, I had sick birds shortly after the show. While many birds were exhibiting signs best thought to be paratyphoid (salmonella) the death rate seemed to be too rapid, and high for paratyphoid. I knew a fellow in Chicago who owned an import quarantine station for hookbills, and was trained in the poultry field. When I explained to him what the problems were, he said that my birds had psittacosis. I did not know much on psittacosis at that time, but trusted him, and followed what he said I needed to do. Within a very short time, the birds started to get better. As I continued the treatment, they laid, and even had babies hatching while the birds were still on the medication. Others in my area still had sick and dying birds. When I told them what I was doing, they felt I was out in left field. Did I care? NO! Because my birds were fine. One fellow did, however, take a bird to the labs at the Univ. of Minn., and had them post it. What did he find out? Psittacosis! So now what my friend told me had been verified, and others treated for it. For those who had birds back then, this should bring back memories of those who had a lot of sick birds for a long time (several years) after the national.

My next exposure to psittacosis came at the Reading show in January of 1995. I went home from the show on Saturday feeling sort of funny. Within a few days, I was very sick. High temp, no energy, lot of aches and pains. Like a really bad case of the flu. But it did not go away. Went to my doctor who felt I probably had blood poisoning, due to another problem I had. But the medication did nothing, and I continued to get worse, with such high temps I was hallucinating. Back to my doctor, and asked that I be tested for psittacosis chlamydia. Since this test takes over a week to get done, my doctor put me on tetracycline to treat the psittacosis (that had not yet been diagnosed). Her feelings were that if it was not psittacosis, it was some sort of infection that this medication would still work on. By the time the blood work came in, showing that I did in fact HAVE psittacosis, I was feeling better. As soon as I knew this, I ordered medications to treat my birds, in case they had it as well. A few weeks later, I had a flare up, being almost as sick as I was the first time. Seems I was not on the tetracycline long enough too completely get me over the infection. There were two other confirmed cases that I know of, directly from this show. I heard there were other people that were in the hospital. If they had it or not, I do not know. The week following the Reading show, was the first Oklahoma National. A bus went to this show from the York, Pa. Most on that bus were sick – either going to the show, or coming back from the show, with some ending up in the hospital.

In December 1997, I had another confirmed case of psittacosis, probably gotten at a fall show. In January 2000 I got sick again, and while I was not tested for it, I think it was psittacosis once more. I was sick for three months with a nagging cough, headaches, and the chills. Like many others who were at this Reading show, I had a rash of sick birds. Heard of many breeders who lost quite a few of their birds. I lost a few, but as soon as I saw the sick birds here, I ordered the medications that I use to treat for psittacosis. Once on it for a short time, I lost no more birds

Now I hear of two pigeon breeders who have been confirmed with psittacosis chlamydia. Both are quite sick, and could have become a statistic, except for one whose wife thought to ask for the blood test, and another whose doctor was aware of psittacosis. Those at the Oklahoma National are aware that Jim Mueller

(Calif.) collapsed at the show, and was thought to have had a heart attack. He does not have a heart problem, but rather the psittacosis had progressed to the point of affecting his heart. Bill Beaver (NC) has some asthma problems, and had a doctor who tested him for psittacosis when he did not respond to treatment for pneumonia. Bill has been told to sell all of his birds, by his doctor, to reduce his risk of this happening again. Both Jim and Bill were at the Myrtle Beach National, and at Louisville this year, although there is no way to know where they got it. Laurie Mueller, Jim's wife, (who has not felt well since the Oklahoma City National), is being treated for pneumonia. Blood work has been taken to see if Laurie has psittacosis.

## How does it spread?

Psittacosis can spread in two different ways:

- 1) By any nasally, misty discharge from the mouth or nostrils; (What this means, is that in a show room environment, or in a loft, even one with decent ventilation, every bird and person can be exposed to psittacosis within a very short time, if just one bird is sneezing the germs into the air.)
- 2) When dried droppings turn into dust. Once the birds have it, some can be carriers, and never show any sign of illness. It is passed in the droppings, but the birds that are carriers, do not have to pass some of the 'germ' in every dropping they have. This makes a fecal test sort of hit and miss. Once the droppings dry, the dust can yield the 'germ', which can find it's way into cracks or corners, and lay there inactive for months and months. Any bird or person breathing in this dust can get the germ.

## Diagnosis and treatment.

Human testing is by a blood test. It is a test to see what the antibody count is. Once a person has it, the antibody count does not go back to what was normal. A blood test is probably the best way to check for it in pigeons as well. Just because you have it one time, and get over it, does not mean that you will never get it again. You can have it many times, all unrelated to each other. While it seems that it cannot be spread from person to person, this is not a sure thing. It is felt that humans can give it to birds. We KNOW that birds do give it to people. People can get it from the dust (even in a loft that is scraped daily). The symptoms people get will vary from a slight feeling of the flu, to pneumonia, to very serious respiratory problems, to (in advanced cases) heart problems. (This [heart] stage can often times become fatal.) Most people, who have it, will have a dry hacking cough that seems to last and last. Headaches, muscle ache, basic flu symptoms that do not go away. Some will have a sort of photophobia (lights bother eyes). It seems that young children, under ten or so, have some sort of natural immunity to it. Many people will get psittacosis, and get over it in a few days with only mild discomfort. But others can get as sick from it as Jim, Bill, others and I have.

Symptoms may take from a few days to ten days to appear. The severity of the illness can vary by the intensity of the particular strain. It is my understanding that the strongest strains are those from Macaws. Macaws are nasally to start with, and seem to spread more moist discharges than other hookbills. On top of that, they are one of the largest of the hookbills. (It is my understanding that there was a Macaw at the show in Reading, Pa. in January of 1995.)

In pigeons, symptoms will vary from a bird sitting around ruffled, going light, to nasal and eye discharges, loose -- watery droppings, to severe cases of paratyphoid, or coccidia. Some birds with psittacosis will show similar signs to those with PMV-1 or those with paratyphoid of the brain. That is the twisting and trembling of the head and neck. These birds will usually die from the psittacosis within a few days. Others die from the combination of psittacosis and paratyphoid or coccidia. Keep in mind that *most times*, paratyphoid does not kill a bird in a few days. When you see birds dying in rapid order, with signs of paratyphoid, it is often because the paratyphoid is a secondary infection. Treating the secondary infection, be it paratyphoid or coccidia, is not the answer. Some birds are carriers, and never show a sign of being sick. But will have the germ in their droppings on an intermittent basis, going on forever. This makes it hard to be sure of having or not having psittacosis when checking only with droppings.

The drug of choice (for humans) is tetracycline, with doxycycline being the best of these. For the birds, it is also the drug of choice. According to the latest USDA info I have read, it is suggested that the birds be treated for a length of 45 days to insure that the carrier birds are cured in order to stop the on going spread of the germs. While treating, it is also imperative that the loft be disinfected on a weekly basis, to keep the disease from spreading in the loft, to reinfect the birds at a later date. For a disinfectant, quaternary ammonium compounds are recommended. My choice to disinfect with is Tek-Trol, as it is not hard on the hands, the birds, or even the eggs, and is listed as being effective on psittacosis chlamydia. It also has a residual effect that I feel is important in getting this disease under control. Spray the loft from the ceiling to the floor, so that it is wet for at least ten minutes. If you have bedding on the floor, spray, rake and spray again. After a few uses you will have a lasting fresh smell to your loft.

To medicate the birds, the best drug to use is a tetracycline that has 324 grams per pound. I have used Tetra-Bac 324, as well as Tetrasol 324 (names are different due to different manufacturers). Do not use a 'regular' strength terramycin, as it is much too weak to be effective. You mix two teaspoons per gallon of water. If you are leaving the grit with the birds while treating you have to increase this to three teaspoons per gallon. The calcium in the oyster shell binds the tetracycline, preventing it from doing what it should. Fresh every day, served in a plastic or crock container –do not use metal. Use this for 45 days, without skipping a day. You can (and should) add regular vitamins to this medication several days a week. As I understand it, the tetracycline does not kill the psittacosis, but rather keeps it from reproducing, and it takes this long for the existing ones to die a natural death. This treatment, along with the weekly disinfecting, will take care of the sickness. It will also take care of the paratyphoid that is a secondary infection, caused by the psittacosis running the birds down.

If you have sick birds, and do not know for sure what the problem is, take some to the state diagnostic lab to be tested. They can give you an accurate diagnosis, but be sure to ask them to check for psittacosis. This test may not be made if it is not asked for. If you have sick birds do not just cull them out, and expect the rest to be fine. Find out what the problem is, and treat for it. This is the only way to be sure you have gotten rid of the problem. If not, you can have carriers that do not appear to be sick, and when you go to a show, you will spread it to other people and birds. At some point, if this is not gotten under control, we are going to have someone die from it. I do not think that any pigeon fancier wants to be the one who has a part in this happening. If everyone who had sick birds after the Reading and Oklahoma City shows in January of 1995 had taken the proper steps, it is possible that this strain of psittacosis chlamydia would have been wiped out of the pigeons at that time. It is my feeling that the strain that Jim and Bill have goes right back to this outbreak of 1995. The responsible thing for everyone to do is treat your birds for this, IF it is possible they have been infected. You can do so while they are breeding, and it is not going to hurt your production. Be sure to disinfect while treating.

### **Getting the medications and disinfectants.**

While most pigeon supply may carry the above medications, most will not have it in the two-pound tubs that are most economical to purchase. They may not have the Tek-Trol disinfectant either. You should be able to get both from either of the following places:

Jeffers Supply – 1-800-533-3377                      Valley Vet Supply – 1-800-468-0059

### **Reference materials.**

There are many sites with more information on psittacosis chlamydia. A few are included here, but the web has more sites, as does your local library.

<http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/doh/html/cd/cdpsit.html>

[http://www.cdc.gov.ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/psittacosis\\_t.htm](http://www.cdc.gov.ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/psittacosis_t.htm)

<http://www.multiscope.com/hotspot/psittacosis.htm>

<http://www.acstiels.com/psittacosis.htm>

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