**PSITTACOSIS:**

Questions and answers by Dr J. R. Baker (Liverpool University, Eng.) (Courtesy "The Budgerigar")

**What is Psittacosis?**
Psittacosis, sometimes known as ornithosis, is a highly infectious disease of birds, mainly affecting the parrot family but waterfowl and other species are sometimes affected. Humans and domestic pets such as dogs can also be affected. The cause is an organism called Chlamydia which is neither a bacteria nor a virus.

**W***here does the disease come from?*

One of the major problems with this disease is that large numbers of budgerigars are carrying this infection without showing the symptoms and are excreting small numbers of chlamydia from time to time. If the carrier bird is stressed or if a susceptive bird is put in contact with a carrier bird disease will develop and diseased birds pass out very large numbers of chlamydia in their droppings, in the feather dust and in nasal discharges. Other in-contact birds are not able to stand the weight of infection from diseased birds and are therefore likely to succumb to the infection. Wild birds are another source of the infection and in this regard pigeons are probably the worst.

***W****hat are the symptoms of psittacosis?*

The symptoms of psittacosis are very varied, from sudden death of an apparently healthy bird to a bird with slight nasal discharge and nothing else. Carrier birds show no symptoms at all. Typically, the bird is off colour with diarrhoea and often shows some difficulty breathing, getting gradually worse and in spite of any treatment usually dies within three to six days after symptoms are first seen. A definite diagnosis of psittacosis cannot be made on just the basis of the symptoms. In humans the disease starts with flu- like symptoms, progressing to pneumonia, and is in some cases fatal. It is recommended that should bird fanciers get flu like symptoms that do not clear up in three days they should contact their doctor and mention that there is a possibility that they might have psittacosis; the more rapidly the correct treatment can be started the quicker will be the cure and the less chance of developing serious illness.

**W***hat should the fancier do if psittacosis is suspected?*

The first thing to do is get the diagnosis confirmed or refuted. This can be done on samples of droppings or from samples from a dead bird. You will need to contact your veterinary surgeon to arrange for this to be done as the samples have to be sent to a specialist laboratory for testing. At the present time the tests take about a week although research is being undertaken on more rapid methods of diagnosis. While waiting for results of the tests the fancier should have no contacts with any other birds either at a show or in another fancier's aviary. The fancier alone must tend to the birds and no other fancier or members of the family should enter the bird room. To reduce the risk of the fancier contracting the disease, overalls, wellington boots and a face mask are a good idea. The rules detailed below should be followed.

**A***nd if psittacosis is confirmed?*

**Treatment:**All birds in the aviary should he treated. The usual preparation used is terramycin soluble powder 5.5%, available through your veterinarian. This comes with a plastic scoop and one level scoopful. should be dissolved per litre of water and given to the birds for 40 days as the only source of drinking water. Fresh solution should be made every other day. The very long course of treatment is necessary as, for part of its life, the Chlamydia lives inside cells and it is only when it comes out of the cells that it is susceptible and the terramycin will kill it. 40 days will allow time for all the Chlamydia to leave the cells, plus a safety margin as well. Just because there are no more sick birds do not be tempted to stop treatment before that time is up or the disease will almost certainly reappear.
**The bird room.** Once treatment has started the birds will remain infectious for about ten days and will be shedding Chlamydia for this time. The organism can live in the bird-roorn, so this needs very thorough cleaning. This should start with a very thorough wetting of everything with disinfectant to lay the dust which is very infectious to humans. This should be followed by scrubbing and washing down so that everything is spotless. Cleaning like this should be done twice, once about a fortnight after the treatment has started and again about five days before it is due to end.

**R**ules: The fancier should keep to the following rules for the entire period the birds are under treatment:

1. Do not allow anyone else to enter the bird-room
2. Do not sell or otherwise dispose of any birds and do not introduce any new birds part way through the treatment.
3. Do not visit any other fancier's stud and ideally, do not have contact with other fanciers, staying away from meetings, etc.
4. Do not enter birds in shows and don't even visit shows.
5. If you're a judge or a show official, get someone else to take your place.

 These rules are designed to reduce the spread of infection which can be from bird to bird or via humans who can unknowingly carry the infection in their clothes and about their person, and to convince fanciers of the very serious nature of this disease, both for their birds and for themselves.