



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

VETERINARY CARE

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BACKGROUND

A veterinary care program for bird facilities should consist of both preventative and emergency protocols that ensure the health of the facility's avian collection. These protocols should include both daily visual and periodical physical examinations and other husbandry procedures, keeping of medical records for individual birds, and quarantine periods for new birds entering the collection.

POSITION

The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators recognizes that not all facilities may have a veterinarian on staff but recommends that all collections have access to regular veterinary care. Whether on staff or on contract, care should be from a qualified avian veterinarian and there should be a veterinarian available nearby at all times in case of emergencies.

To ensure the health of a collection, daily visual exams and periodically scheduled procedures such as fecal exams and coping or trimming of beaks and claws (if needed depending on the species) should be performed. For individuals with orthopedic injuries, regularly scheduled radiographs may be necessary to provide information on wellness. Through daily visual exams, subtle physical and behavioral changes can be caught quickly and lead to early diagnosis and treatment. Weighing birds routinely and recording any subtle or drastic weight loss or gain can also lead to early diagnosis and treatment. Birds often mask illness and do not show obvious visual symptoms until the illness has progressed. Early diagnosis and treatment may mean the difference between life and death for your bird.

Staff

All staff that work with the collection, whether paid or unpaid, should be trained to recognize the most common symptoms of injury, stress, and illness including lethargy, lack of coordination, lack of appetite, fluffed feathers, droopy eyelids, changes in fecals, etc. Staff should monitor all bird weights regularly and be able to recognize the signs of any subtle or drastic loss or gain in weight. This is very important if weight management is used in training. If a bird's weight and diet are managed daily, the bird should be weighed daily. Weight loss can be an early sign of a health problem.

One staff member should act as the point person to monitor the collection's health and weights. Other staff should notify this person if there are any health concerns. This person will make the decision whether or not the bird needs medical attention. Guidelines should be established as to what medical procedures staff members are allowed to do and which should only be done by the veterinarian or under the veterinarian's instructions. If staff members are allowed to do procedures such as coping, bandaging, etc., then they should be fully trained and checked off on these procedures.

Records

Records should be maintained on each bird in the collection. These records should include the bird's weight, diet, and any physical or behavioral changes. Full medical records should also be kept. This should include any examinations, fecal testing, vaccinations, surgeries, coping, etc. Some facilities choose to have separate daily records and medical records.

Physicals and Vaccinations

Some veterinarians like to perform annual exams with blood work, radiographs, and fecal exams; others prefer to do exams less frequently. However, some individual birds may need more frequent coping or nails trims than annually. Depending on the species, location of your facility, and your veterinarian's position on vaccinations, some birds may be given yearly vaccines for diseases such as West Nile Virus. Work with your veterinarian to set up a schedule that works best for your facility.

Many procedures can be trained using positive reinforcement. This can help in the reduction of stress. These trained procedures can include administering medication, clipping wings, trimming talons and toenails, body exams, and more. Birds can also be trained to participate in towelings, and other behaviors that aid in restraint. To help reduce stress in your birds, it is also recommended that staff work closely with their veterinarian in assisting with exams.

Geriatric Care

Due to protection from disease, predators, and injury, and the abundance of food; birds in human care often live longer than their wild counterparts. An understanding of the aging process for different species in the collection should be held by one staff person. As an individual bird ages, staff should watch for health changes related to the aging process such as cataracts, cardiovascular disease, arthritis, etc. A geriatric health plan should be developed with the assistance of their veterinarian.

Quarantine

Depending on your facility, quarantine may be required. Even if it is not required, it is highly recommended to have a quarantine protocol. A quarantine period allows for physical examinations, routine tests, vaccinations, and disease detection before a new bird is exposed to the rest of the collection. A minimum quarantine period of 30 days is recommended. The location of your quarantine facility should be separate from the rest of your bird collection to prevent any disease transmission. Husbandry protocols for the quarantine collection should also be set up to prevent disease transmission. The welfare of the bird is always our first concern when designing a quarantine plan. For some birds, such as young birds being hand-raised or those that are newly acquired, allowing trainers to work with the bird during quarantine may reduce stress and provide better welfare. Some facilities allow trainers to work with birds in quarantine at the end of the day, before they go home. Some facilities also allow trainers to take young birds home while being raised as long as they follow quarantine procedures designed to protect other birds in the collection.



Bird Death

In the case of a bird's death, it is recommended that your veterinarian perform a necropsy with a full histopathology. Often, the exact cause of death is not immediately apparent by a visual necropsy and more tests are required. Information gathered from the necropsy may also provide information that could improve care of the rest of the collection. Following a bird's death, all precautions should be taken to prevent transmission of an illness to the rest of the collection. The bird's enclosure should be thoroughly disinfected before housing another bird.

Avian Diseases

There are many avian diseases, such as West Nile Virus, Newcastle Disease, and Avian Influenza that can have devastating effects on your collection. Facilities should work with their veterinarian to create prevention and treatment protocols for dealing with diseases, both avian and zoonotic. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums has guidelines already established that can be used in developing protocols for your facility.