



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

VETERINARY CARE

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BACKGROUND

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

POSITION

The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators recognizes that not all facilities may have a veterinarian on staff, but recommends that all populations 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 on-call at all times in case of emergencies.

Visual Checks

The knowledge and understanding that animal care staff have in regard to the species and individuals within their care is vital in maintaining good health and wellbeing. Performing regular visual health checks of an animal forms an integral part of this ongoing knowledge and understanding. Each animal should be assessed daily to help identify early warning signs. It is important to recognize signs of good health; a bright, alert animal that reacts to stimuli, is in good physical condition with the absence of pain, disease, trauma, or distress. Visual checks should also ensure that any equipment, tags, or bands are in good working order and not impinging the bird in any way. The animal should also participate in species-appropriate natural behaviors. Special attention should focus on the individual's normal activity level in order to identify, investigate, and report any changes in the behavior that may be associated with pain or other medical concerns.

In addition to visual checks, routine comprehensive health exams are recommended to detect potential illnesses before they start to affect an animal's wellbeing. The data gathered allows staff to track each animal over time and to make quality decisions for their care and maintenance.

Health exams vary by facility but may include: Complete physical exam, intestinal parasite screening, external parasite screening, complete blood count, blood chemistry panel, radiographs, review of past medical, social and behavioral history, review of medications, review of body condition and nutritional status, and coping or trimming of beaks and talons/nails (if needed depending on the species). Geriatric individuals, or those with orthopedic injuries (including old, healed injuries), may require more frequent, regularly scheduled radiographs to provide important information about their overall wellness. 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 a bird.

Staff

All staff who work with the population, whether paid or unpaid, should be trained to quickly recognize any changes that may indicate poor health in an individual. Small changes in movement, body and feather condition, dietary intake, eyes, excreta (feces, urine, urates), and any behavior that deviates from what is normal for that individual can be indications of pain, disease, trauma, or distress. Immediate action should be taken if an animal is injured or unwell or if poor wellbeing is identified or suspected at any time.

Weight

By regularly monitoring a bird's weight, caregivers can establish what is normal for each individual bird. A sudden or gradual weight loss (or gain) is often the first and one of the earliest and most reliable indicators of illness or other health problems. Tracking weight over time is an invaluable tool to establish normal baselines for individuals and allow staff to quickly identify changes in weight. A significant weight change is often defined as a 5–10% loss or gain in body weight; however, staff should be able to recognize the signs of any subtle or drastic loss or gain. Training birds to voluntarily participate in cooperative care by self-weighing (flying or hopping on a scale) is essential to prevent unnecessary handling and stress to allow for regular weight monitoring. This is especially important if birds are part of a food or weight management plan for training. If a bird's weight and diet are managed daily, the bird should be weighed daily to ensure they are receiving proper nutrition and maintained at their optimal weight for physical and mental health.

Each facility should have a health monitoring and reporting protocol which is understood by all staff and volunteers. That protocol should include but is not limited to monitoring the population's health and weights and who to report any health concerns to in a timely manner. Guidelines should be established as to which 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

Comprehensive records should be maintained for each bird in the population. This allows caregivers to make informed decisions about their care and provide written documentation for veterinary care.

These records should document:

- Veterinary attention, examinations, treatments, prescriptions, and surgical procedures
- Laboratory findings and diagnostic testing (e.g., fecal exams, bloodwork)
- Diet, nutrition, and weight tracking
- Treatment plans and progress notes
- Wellbeing assessments and behavioral observations



- Preventive care (e.g., vaccinations, coping, routine health checks)

Some facilities choose to have separate daily records and medical records.

Vaccinations

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 and maintains a high level of wellbeing for the population.

Many procedures can be trained using positive reinforcement. This can help in the reduction of stress. These trained procedures can include administering medication, trimming talons and toenails, body exams, and more. Birds can also be trained to participate in toweling 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. IAATE does not recommend training free contact voluntary injections due to potential for injury to the bird and strongly suggests training for voluntary restraint instead.

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 population should be created and shared with all staff working with the population. 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 a veterinarian and may include more frequent examinations and possible medication to manage age related conditions.

Quarantine

Depending on your facility, quarantine may be required for newly acquired birds. 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 population. A minimum quarantine period of 30 days is recommended. The location of your quarantine facility should be separate from the rest of the bird population to prevent any disease transmission. Husbandry protocols for the quarantine population should also be set up to prevent disease transmission, e.g., separate equipment, furniture, husbandry supplies, etc. The wellbeing 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 wellbeing. Some facilities allow trainers to work with birds in quarantine at the end of the day or 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 population.



Bird Death

In the case of a bird's death, it is recommended that your veterinarian or a veterinary pathologist 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 population. Following a bird's death, all precautions should be taken to prevent transmission of an illness to the rest of the population. The bird's habitat 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 population. Facilities should work with their veterinarian to create biosecurity and treatment protocols for dealing with diseases, both avian and zoonotic. AZA, BIAZA, and EAZA have guidelines already established that can be used in developing protocols for your facility.