

PSITTACOSIS

THIS is the text of a talk on health broadcast recently from the ZB, YA and YZ stations of the NZBS by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Deputy-Director-General of Health.

LAST December and early this year we had some cases of parrot fever in this country. The medical name is psittacosis. Long before we knew how it arose and spread, parrots were implicated. In 1880 a Swiss household, fond of birds, lost many of their parrots with some disease that laid low seven of the family as well, three of them dying. As far as I know this is the first record of a doctor connecting bird-keeping with an influenza-like disease in human beings.

From then on further outbreaks are recorded, but fifty years had to pass before the cause was established. About 1930 there were widespread epidemics, the clues all leading back to infected parrots from South America. A virus was recognised, and in the next few years proved to be the cause of the parrot fever in parrots and the psittacosis, as the parrot fever is called, in man. The trail led past parrots to other species of birds—canaries, budgerigars, finches, pigeons, and even fowls and ducks, can all be responsible for infection in human beings. The trail has not ended with domesticated birds. Wild Australian and Argentine parrots and parakeets have been found infected.

In nature, epidemics occur in birds of the kind mentioned, some die and most recover. These still harbour the infection and become carriers. Young birds, quite healthy, can be shown to be infected before they leave the nest. Once infected, a bird stays so, and may live an apparently normal life. Upset that bird in some way and the virus becomes active and can be passed on to man. For example, catching and caging wild birds is frequently followed by an outbreak of the disease in what were apparently healthy birds in nature. Or in domesticated birds uprooting them from a shop or an aviary and sending them elsewhere, may cause the trouble to flare out.

This is evidently the story behind our outbreak of psittacosis. After 1930 many countries put a ban on the importation of birds of the parrot family. New Zealand did this, and we have had

freedom from the disease for over two decades. Last year Great Britain lifted the ban on parrot importation, as it seemed safe to do so. Representations were made for the lifting of the ban in New Zealand. As Great Britain had had no outbreaks after her action it seemed safe to follow suit here. Accordingly, at the end of last year, permission was given for the importation of members of the parrot family into this country. The very first shipments were followed by an outbreak of the disease in our people. The birds were from Australia. They were apparently healthy on leaving and on landing here, but the trip or the new quarters in New Zealand upset them. On being sold and sent around our country they have been further upset, and have infected some of their new owners or people who have handled them in transmission. The ban on importations was reimposed as soon as the first human cases occurred, and we have to cope with birds from those few unfortunate shipments.

The point concerns you if in any way you handle parrots bought from those shipments, or contact any household or aviary that had a new parrot at that time. Remember, birds may seem healthy but be carriers of infection indefinitely. Infection happens through inhaling dust from dried droppings, or through handling sick birds, or the droppings and feathers of apparently healthy birds carrying the infection. In from four to fifteen days there is a fever-like influenza. It begins suddenly, with headache, pains in the back and limbs, and a temperature. There is often sickness and vomiting. It may be all over in a week or go on to coughing and a nasty pneumonia in the second week. If you have contacted any parrot and get such an illness, remember to tell your doctor about the parrot. He will then treat you with the requisite antibiotic. If you forget about the parrot it may be thought to be just flu. Any unhealthy birds should be killed and the cages cleaned up and sterilised.



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