PUBLIC HEALTH

Introducing Psittacosis Polly

She Is a New Health Menace; Carrier of Parrot Fever, She Is More Dangerous Than Was Famous Typhoid Mary

By JANE STAFFORD

HAVE you met Psittacosis Polly? Beware if you do; and never, on any account, invite her (or him) into your home because a Psittacosis Polly in your parlor may be more dangerous than a Typhoid Mary in your kitchen.

Like Typhoid Mary, who recently died, Psittacosis Polly is a healthy creature who carries the germs of a deadly fever. Typhoid Mary, as you know, was a cook who became notorious because as a carrier of typhoid germs she spread this disease widely, causing many cases of illness and even death before health authorities were able to confine her in an institution and check this phase of her career.

Psittacosis Polly is a parrot, or a lovebird or other member of the psittacine bird family, that carries in a healthy body the germs of psittacosis or parrot fever. She is more dangerous even than Typhoid Mary, because psittacosis is a more highly fatal disease than typhoid fever. It kills about one out of every five patients, records from the last epidemic in this country show. It also has what health authorities call a high attack rate, meaning that anyone exposed to the germs is almost certain to get the disease. Besides this, it will be a good deal harder to find Psittacosis Polly than to detect a Typhoid Mary.

1930 Epidemic

Remember the frightening epidemic of parrot fever back in 1930 that made 169 persons sick and killed 33 and even invaded the laboratories of the U. S. Public Health Service? Two of the laboratory staff died, and so many others were sick that for the first and only time in its history the laboratory was fumigated and Dr. G. W. McCoy, then the director, sent the entire staff away, heroically remaining behind himself to continue investigations of the dangerous malady.

The possibility of another parrot fever epidemic is worrying officials of the U. S. Public Health Service right now. As a means of preventing such an occurrence, they are seriously considering tightening the regulations governing the importation and interstate shipment of birds of the parrot family.

Psittacosis Polly is the undetected villainess of the situation. She is probably not the healthy old bird that your aunt Sarah has kept for years and years. Birds that have been in homes for many years without causing sickness and without contact with new birds are probably not dangerous. Birds in the zoo, strangely enough, have also escaped the ailment and can be visited safely.

New psittacine birds that have just been brought into the country or just offered for sale even if raised in this country may, however, be a source of danger. Any one of them might be Psittacosis Polly herself, or might have caught the disease from her.

Discovery in a Washington, D. C. family, of three cases of the ailment, acquired from two recently purchased lovebirds, has caused the present official alarm over the situation. The birds were raised in a California aviary that was inspected and certified by the state health department to be free from parrot fever infection.

Whole Family Sick

Mrs. M. bought them at a local department store as a birthday gift for her mother, Mrs. B., who lived with her daughter and son-in-law. Twelve days after the birds were brought home, Mrs. B. was down sick with parrot fever. The next day one of the birds died. Mrs. M. took care of the remaining bird until she herself got sick ten days later. The second bird died in another two days and ten days after that Mr. M. was sick.

The experience of the M. family, health authorities emphasize, is typical of the way parrot fever runs swiftly through an entire family, striking down every member, attacking the lungs as pneumonia does, and often killing the patient within seven to fifteen days.

The three Washington patients, aided by blood from two officers and a laboratory technician of the U. S. Public Health Service, who all had parrot fever during the last epidemic, have now luckily recovered.

Health authorities promptly checked on the other birds in the store where the M. family's two had been bought. The store, meanwhile, had received a second shipment of another one hundred birds. In the total of 106 unsold birds, three, from the second shipment, were found to have parrot fever. Since these birds all came from an aviary that had no signs of psittacosis in its stock, as certified by the California health department in regular inspections, one question worrying health officials is: Where did these five birds get the infection?

The only answer they can give is that there must be healthy carriers of the psittacosis germs, Psittacosis Pollies, birds that do not show any signs of the infection but that can and do pass it on to other birds. This being the case, the situation is pretty serious. If five infected birds arrived in Washington, how many others are being petted—and spreading germs—in other households throughout the land?

May Be Unaware

Probably none of the other birds sold in Washington were infected, because no more human cases have been reported there, and the cases in the M. family got enough local publicity so that in that city bird-owners were probably aware of the danger and physicians on the lookout for the disease among their patients. Physicians elsewhere, however, may not know of the situation, and psittacosis can easily be mistaken for influenza, pneumonia or even typhoid fever.

Like any of these three ailments, psittacosis may begin suddenly with chilly sensations, fever, and headache, or these symptoms may appear after a few days during which the patient has not felt exactly well. The fever when first recorded is usually between 100 and 102 degrees Fahrenheit but tends to go as high as 105 degrees F. during the second week of the illness. At this time the patient is apt to be delirious. He may also have insomnia and if he does sleep he may be disturbed by dreams. Nosebleed is not uncommon, there may be a cough and chest pains, and the patient usually has no appetite. "Rose spots," characteristic of typhoid fever, have been observed on some psittacosis patients.

Among other signs to be noted by the physician is the drop in the number of

white cells in the blood. These may decrease from the normal 6,000 or 8,000 per cubic millimeter to 3,000 or less. In one case the count was as low as 300.

An unpleasant feature of psittacosis is that after the patient has apparently recovered and has had a normal temperature for about three weeks, he may have a relapse.

Age seems to be an important factor in determining whether or not the patient will survive the illness. Children and young adults tend to have light attacks, but it goes hard with older persons. Serum from the blood of patients who have recovered from an attack of psittacosis has been used with good results in treatment of the disease.

Psittacosis or parrot fever is caused by a germ which, like viruses, passes through the pores of porcelain filters and thus can be termed filtrable. Unlike viruses, however, this germ is large enough to be seen under powerful microscopes. It apparently gets around by the kind of germ airlines that influenza and pneumonia germs use, without having to hitch rides on flies, lice, mosquitoes or other insects. The germ goes from bird to bird and from bird to man, but not, except perhaps in rare cases, from man to man.

The virus or germ is very highly infective, as shown by the experience in the Hygienic Laboratory (now the National Institute of Health) of the U. S. Public Health Service during the 1930 epidemic. Of the 11 persons who got parrot fever while studies of the disease were being made there, only two had direct contact with infected birds. Some of the others were working with cultures of germs from the birds, but some were engaged in entirely different work and never went near the rooms where either birds or germs from them were kept.

Temporary Ban

At the time of the 1929-1930 outbreak, a temporary ban was put into effect which prevented any parrots or members of the parrot family being brought into the United States. This ban has since been revised and at present such birds may be brought in under conditions designed to prevent sick or infected birds from coming in but not to exclude healthy birds. There are also regulations of a similar nature governing interstate shipment of birds of the parrot family.

In spite of these regulations, parrot fever continues to be something of a health menace—just how extensive a menace being at present unknown. Health officials are not even certain whether the present situation, as disclosed by the three cases in Washington, is due to leaks of infected birds into the country that can be prevented by tightening regulations. It may all be a question of healthy carriers—the Psittacosis Pollies. If there were only one Psittacosis Polly it might not be impossible to find the bird and thus eliminate the disease, but there are probably many of them.

BEWARE!

Liked as Pets

The disease in man could be controlled by a nation-wide elimination of all birds belonging to the parrot family. With a considerable group of the population favoring these birds as pets, however, and with parrakeet-raising a sizable industry in one section of the country, it might be difficult permanently to prevent traffic in these birds.

Some communities have met the situation by local regulations. Baltimore, Pittsburgh and New York City, for example, have enacted embargoes prohibiting the introduction into these cities of any and all birds of the parrot family. Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota and Oregon have embargoes prohibiting parrakeets. Federal health officials are not yet ready to ask a nation-wide ban on all birds of the parrot family. If the danger grows and no other way to check it can be found, such action may be necessary, however.

Parrots and their relatives are not the only birds that get psittacosis or parrot fever. Other birds, including canaries, have been known to have it. A recent report states that the disease has been found in Arctic petrels in the Faroe Islands, way up north of Scotland. Canaries and other birds commonly kept as pets, however, are believed to have acquired the disease by contact with parrots or other psittacine birds. If members of this bird family could be eliminated from the bird population of the country, health authorities are certain that parrot fever or psittacosis could be eliminated as a danger to the life and health of the human population.

It is estimated that 200,000 sets of tonsils are removed annually in England and Wales.

Eels are rare in Wisconsin waters, because they must travel all the way up the Mississippi from the sea to get there.

●RADIO

Dr. John W. Finch, director, U. S. Bureau of Mines, will be guest scientist on "Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, Director, Science Service, over the coast to coast network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Saturday, March 18, 6:15 p. m. EST, 5:15 p. m. CST, 4:15 p. m. MST, 3:15 p. m. PST. Listen in to your local station. Listen in each Saturday.