

PUBLIC HEALTH

Find Parrot Fever Invasion of Barnyards and Pigeon Roosts

Strong Suspicion That Many Patients Sick During Recent Years with "Virus Pneumonia" Had Psittacosis

PARROT fever, or psittacosis, dangerous ailment of parrots and parakeets and their human owners or handlers, has invaded the barnyards and pigeon roosts of the nation. Discovery of the virus of the disease in both pigeons and chickens was reported by Dr. Karl F. Meyer, director of the Hooper Foundation, University of California Medical School, and consultant to the California State Department of Health, at the meeting of the American Epidemiological Society in New York.

The discovery, made in California, New Jersey and Chicago, means that the job of protecting humans from this very contagious and often fatal ailment is much tougher than disease fighters suspected when they thought they had only to protect bird lovers and breeders from getting the disease from pet birds. This involved inspection of all aviaries and of birds as they were shipped to pet stores for sale. Inspection of all chicken farms and all the flocks owned by pigeon fanciers would be a herculean task.

The discovery of the disease among chickens and pigeons is so recent that plans for controlling it and preventing its spread have not yet been considered. Since making this discovery, however, Dr. Meyer strongly suspects that many patients sick during the last several years with attacks of what was diagnosed as "virus pneumonia" or "pneumonitis" probably had parrot fever.

The disease is so highly infectious

that not only chicken breeders but poultry dealers, market men and housewives who plucked chickens to prepare them for the family dinner might have acquired psittacosis if the fowl had been infected. Symptoms of the disease in humans are somewhat like those of pneumonia, similar enough to be diagnosed "atypical pneumonia," which is the label doctors have used in recent years for a pneumonia-like disease not caused by the pneumococci or by any other germ they could identify. Physicians would not be looking for the psittacosis virus unless the patients had a history of being near parrots or other psittacine birds, and so would not make tests that would show its presence.

Years of study of this disease led Dr. Meyer to make such tests on blood and lung specimen sent him for diagnosis by a doctor in Pasadena, Calif., who had a patient sick with an unfamiliar malady. The tests showed the psittacosis virus, but the patient and his relatives declared there were no parrots or parakeets on their premises. They admitted having pigeons, however, so Dr. Meyer promptly inspected these birds, even though no one had ever before reported psittacosis in pigeons. He found 60% of this flock of 32 pigeons infected. Already in 1939, he found the infection in 7 of 19 doves examined in Chicago. These birds had infected a student and a caretaker. Discovery of parrot fever in chickens was made in New Jersey, where the virus was found

in one of three chickens examined. Here again the owner had contracted an "atypical pneumonia" which was recognized as psittacosis.

The discovery of parrot fever in chickens and pigeons and the probability, therefore, that the disease is fairly prevalent in humans, though travelling under an alias, led to tests of various strains of viruses isolated from human patients sick with influenza and pneumonia. Some of this work was done in Dr. Meyer's laboratory and some in the Berkeley, Calif., laboratories of Dr. Monroe Eaton, of the Rockefeller Foundation. At least one virus from human pneumonitis patients, the MP virus isolated by Drs. Thomas Francis and T. P. Magill, of New York City, was found by these tests to be indistinguishable from that of psittacosis. According to Dr. Henry Pinkerton, a virus morphologically identical with psittacosis has been isolated from pigeons on a thiamin-deficient diet. The birds came originally from South Carolina.

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MEDICINE

Kidney Extract for Blood Pressure Encouraging

"DISTINCTLY encouraging results" in treating many animals and 17 high blood pressure patients with a kidney extract that lowers blood pressure were reported by Dr. Irvine H. Page, of Indianapolis to the American College of Physicians in Boston.

General use of the material is apparently still in the future, as Dr. Page stated that the problem of production of the extract in sufficient quantity has not yet been solved.

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