Round Table Discussion

Zoonotic Disease: A Concern for Everyone

Rabies. Psittacosis. Mycobacteria. In exotic animal practice, whether you work exclusively with pet exotics, wildlife, or zoo animals, you need to be aware of and concerned about potential zoonotic disease for yourself, your associates, and your clients. Most veterinarians are educated about some zoonoses in veterinary school, but many are not educated about even some of the common zoonotic diseases that exotic animals can transmit. Furthermore, most veterinary technicians and assistants are even less knowledgeable about zoonotic conditions, and these individuals are perhaps the people most in contact with animals that are potential disease carriers. To better understand which zoonotic diseases exotic animal veterinary professionals are most at risk for and how they might protect themselves and their clients better from these risks, I have asked several individuals who work in a variety of different settings with exotic animals that could potentially carry zoonotic diseases to discuss how they approach the concept of zoonoses in their practices. The participants are Jeff Applegate, DVM, North Carolina State University School of Veterinary Medicine, Raleigh, NC, USA; Michelle Hawkins, VMD, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, Davis, CA, USA; Katherine Quesenberry, MS, MPH, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), The Animal Medical Center, New York, NY, USA; Greg Rich, DVM, Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital of Louisiana, Metairie, LA, USA; and Paul Welch, DVM, Forest Trails Animal Hospital, Tulsa, OK, USA. I hope that hearing their statements will make all veterinary professionals stop and consider whether they are taking necessary steps to learn about these diseases and to protect themselves, their staff, their clients, and even their patients from situations involving potential zoonotic disease transmission.

Laurie Hess, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice) Associate Editor

Question: What zoonotic diseases do you worry about most in your practice?

Dr Applegate:

The diseases I worry about most are rabies, chlamydiosis, dermatophytosis, E cuniculi, influenza, Cheyletiella, mycobacteriosis (more often in fish than other animals), Salmonella, Giardia, and West Nile virus. We have a pretty active infectious disease committee, and it is very often that they err on the side of caution regarding infectious disease; thus, personal protective equipment, restriction of animals, and even isolation is pretty common.

Dr Hawkins:

I worry about the following 5 diseases most:

1) Chlamydia psittaci is of most concern as it is the most common zoonotic disease identified in pet birds in our practice. Not only are there still plenty of psittacine cases, but also our clinic has identified numerous birds of prey with clinical signs and diagnostic evidence of chlamydiosis.
2) Salmonella spp, especially now with the dramatic rise of the backyard poultry industry.
3) West Nile virus is still a significant disease of wild birds here in California during mosquito season, and already this year there have been 2 human cases in our state.
4) Mycobacterium spp is also a disease we are concerned about, primarily in captive and free-ranging wildlife but sometimes in pet birds. Of course, some are of more zoonotic concern than others but we remain vigilant for all species.
5) Because we are a border state, we are constantly on the lookout for the potential for foreign animal diseases. For example, our clinic identified and reported a low pathogenic H5N2 in an Amazon parrot that had not been identified in the US previously.