Round Table Discussion

How Not to “Wing It” with Backyard Poultry

In many practices, appointments and emergencies with backyard poultry have become a daily occurrence. These animals may be beloved pets, but also are considered by some still to be primarily production animals for eggs and meat. Owners obtain these chickens from a variety of sources and do not research the proper husbandry and care for these birds before providing them a home. Unfortunately, many of the same state and federal restrictions for treating poultry still apply to these pets, further complicating treatment. Sometimes, when treating these patients, veterinarians find themselves “between a rock and a hard place” due to restrictions from the owners, as well as state and federal regulations. We have encouraged five veterinarians who treat backyard chickens in a variety of capacities to share their experiences and insight on care and treatment of these birds. The participants include: José Biascoechea, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), Exotic Vet Care, Mount Pleasant, SC, USA; Len Donato, VMD, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), Randor Veterinary Hospital, Wayne, PA, USA; Krista A. Keller, DVM, Dipl ACZM, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, USA; Hilary Stern, DVM, Animal Hospital of Soquel, Santa Cruz, CA, USA; and Alicia McLaughlin, DVM, Center for Birds and Exotics Animal Medicine, Bothell, WA, USA.

We would like to thank these individuals for taking the time to answer our questions. We trust their accounts will provide you some information that is helpful in treating backyard poultry in the clinical setting and in helping owners educate themselves on proper care for these birds.

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

Question: Where are most of your clients obtaining their chickens and at what age? Are the chickens usually given any vaccines or medical treatments before being obtained by the owner?

Dr Biascoechea:

Some owners order them off the Internet and get them shipped to their homes. Others are obtained from local feed stores, usually after 1 week of age. Most are vaccinated for Marek’s disease, except the ones bred by small local breeders.

Dr Donato:

Most clients tend to purchase their chickens from feed stores or farms when they are approximately 10 to 16 weeks of age. We also see a lot of re-homed chickens that can be of any age, but typically are under 1 year of age. The majority of chicks we see supposedly are administered vaccinations and given antiparasitic medication. The records from the supplier can be spotty at times or were not given to the new owner, so we consider those treatments not to have been completed officially.

Dr Keller:

Most chickens I see are purchased at local (in state) hatcheries; however, a growing numbers of chickens are coming in for evaluation that were obtained from Craigslist either as chicks or adults. Although I ask each of my clients about vaccination status, I would estimate that less than 10% of clients know this information or have a certificate of purchase that would indicate if any vaccination was performed.

Dr McLaughlin:

The majority of my clients obtain their birds as young chicks from either feed stores or local breeders. Sometimes the chicks are vaccinated for Marek’s disease, but not always. It is common for no medical history to be provided at the time of purchase.

Dr Stern:

Most chicken owners I meet have obtained their pets as chicks through a feed store. However, each