

## CHOOSING A VETERINARIAN FOR YOUR BIRD

by Linda Greeson

The Avian specialty has been a part of Veterinary medicine for a long time, but a qualified Avian Veterinarian is still a treasure often hard to find. The number of Vets who include the care of birds with their small animal practice is steadily increasing as companion birds become increasingly popular. The professional's qualifications for this are highly individual and difficult to evaluate. Education in Avian medicine is increasingly available in our veterinary colleges, but the courses offered are not mandatory and in themselves do not provide adequate training.

It is generally agreed that it is good policy for both the pet owner and the breeder to locate a good Avian Veterinarian before the need to treat illness arises. Using the Yellow Pages of your phone book and making a few calls can give you the names and locations of those professionals treating birds as part of their practice. Evaluating their qualifications and their expertise is a more difficult matter. This can largely be accomplished by word of mouth.

For me, over the years, the most reliable recommendations have been made by other breeders. Pet owners have a tendency to make their judgements on the personality of the individual rather than on his or her professional skills. The experienced breeder will know whether all those expensive diagnostic procedures are being used judiciously and best be able to evaluate skill versus bedside manners.

If you are fortunate enough to locate a veterinarian in your area whose practice is limited to just birds and exotics, you can be reasonably well assured of this individual's qualifications. Someone of this experience is well worth driving the extra miles which may be involved.

Another important credential you may find is membership in the AAV (American Association of Avian Veterinarians). This organization is the source of much educational material, journals, other publications, and widely attended conferences.

To be eligible for board certification with the AAV the professional Veterinarian must pass a lengthy and comprehensive written examination and submit two written papers on Avian medicine considered worthy of publication. Because this program for certification is fairly recent and a time consuming process for the busy professional, there is no doubt that a great majority of excellent Avian Veterinarians do not have this diploma on display.

In rural areas you may well not have a choice but to settle for a small animal veterinarian who will also care for your bird. One who breeds birds is likely to have a bit more knowledge and interest than the one whose major experience is with his own pet. In any situation, a trial visit for a general physical examination of your bird is a worth while expenditure of money. Getting acquainted with the person who will be treating possible future serious illness could be a valued experience.

Almost four years ago, when I moved to a different part of the state, parting with my Avian Vet was one of the most traumatic parts of the experience. It was just by chance that when taking my Sheltie to a local small animal vet, I discovered that she breeds exotics herself and has an all consuming interest in aviculture. Since that time, she is seriously considering turning her small animal practice over to another Veterinarian and devoting herself entirely to Avian medicine. Finding someone with her skills and expertise in this small rural community has been a wonderful stroke of luck for me.

Evaluating the skills of the Avian Vet is difficult to accomplish. The number and complexity of the laboratory procedures now available is overwhelming - as is their cost. When a beloved pet is sick, or for a breeder when it is necessary to know if the rest of the flock is in danger, faith must be placed in the Vet's decisions as to what is necessary to make a diagnosis, and following this, in the decisions on a course of treatment. It is your right to have these procedures and the reasons for performing them explained in full and their results reported to you in detail. A good Veterinarian includes the owner in the entire procedure and gives freely of time to make explanations.

One situation which is often repeated makes life difficult for the Avian Veterinarian. As part of the instinctive behavior related to the

experiences of their forbears in the wild, all birds disguise outward signs of illness just as long as they possibly can. As a consequence the bird brought to the vet may have been suffering from a life threatening condition until it has passed the point where treatment of any kind can be effective. A good vet will take seriously any deviations from normal reported by the owner and investigate possible causes. When the bird is not seen until it is found lying on the bottom of the cage, the poor vet who cannot perform miracles cannot be blamed for its loss.

With the restrictions now placed on the importation of birds, it is necessary for aviculturists to produce all available companion birds. Their success in meeting the increasing demand will depend greatly on a continued exchange of knowledge between the breeder and the Avian Veterinarian. As the demand for skilled care in this specialty of Veterinary Medicine continues to escalate, the number of Avian Veterinarians will also rise to meet the need.