The Privilege of Keeping Birds in Cages and Changing Public Awareness

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Changing Public Attitudes and Awareness

Until recently in Australia most people considered it their (unquestioned) right to keep birds in cages. Increasingly, that assumed "right" is being questioned, and more and more people are considering the keeping of birds in cages a privilege to which is attached responsibilities which have much to do with animal welfare issues and increasing awareness of the physical, mental and perhaps spiritual attributes of birds.

There is also a growing group of people who believe birds should be left to fly "free". Depending on which group you associate yourself with, if any, you might consider the others extremists or out on the fringe, or still living in the dark ages!

We as veterinary surgeons who have devoted considerable time to studying and learning about aspects of birds in sickness and health, in captivity and "the wild", are well-positioned to contribute to expanding public awareness and changing public attitudes in accordance with what we perceive and believe to be the best interests of both captive and wild birds.

Within our professional association, the Association of Avian Veterinarians, as in the wider community, there will be members with differing opinions and beliefs about personal and community rights, privileges and responsibilities as they relate to birds.

An aim of this paper is to promote discussion so as to document areas with which most of us can reach consensus, agreement, with the added goal of then producing some form of pamphlet aiming to improve the quality of life of caged birds, which can be distributed to and by vets, pet shops, bird dealers and aviculturists.

"The Human Nature of Birds" by X.T. Barber, Bookman Press, Melbourne is a book which, when read, is likely to expand the awareness and understanding of many, as is another "little" book, "Johnathon Livingstone Seagull" by Richard Bach, if one is open to spiritual concepts and chooses to read the book as a parable.

Let us start by examining some principles underlying responsible companion animal care as expressed in the NSW Companion Animals Green Paper 1996. These principles have been developed with dogs and cats in mind, but let us see how many of them should also apply to

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those birds which find themselves in captivity and their carers. The author's initial assessment and comments are expressed in italics to distinguish them from those expressed in the above Green Paper.

<u>All carers have a responsibility to provide their companion animals with:</u>

1. **Safety and protection from injury.**

This should apply for caged and pet birds.
However many cages sold for confining birds, as well as many home-made ones, fail dismally to provide safety and protection from injury.
Many small cages fall apart or break if dropped 1-2 metres.
Few cages have secure doors.
Many cages have exposed poorly finished galvanised coatings which provide a source of heavy metal poisoning.
Many cages have narrow gaps which can entrap toes.
Some cages have exposed sharp unprotected ends of wire protruding into them.
Additionally many products currently sold as toys, cage furniture, and food treats predispose caged birds to injury.
Seed bells molded onto sharp pointed wire hooks.
Mirrors with mercury backing exposed
Chromed wire frames to support stainless steel water and food containers.
Galvanised and soldered food and water containers predispose heavy metal poisoning.
Copper food and water containers and other cage items predispose copper poisoning.
Chains for bells, swings and other toys with asymmetrical links can entrap toes and result in fractures, dislocations and death.
Leg chains and their attachments are frequently a cause of injury and their production, sale and/or use should be deemed an act of cruelty.
Sand paper and other abrasive surfaces are sold as sheets for cage floors and sleeves for perches where they predispose and/or aggravate pododermatitis.

2. **Food, water, shelter, exercise and space that is appropriate to the needs of the animal.**

This should apply for caged and pet birds.
Many diets currently provided and marketed for caged birds (and as supplements for wild birds) are inappropriate, unbalanced, incomplete and hence likely to increase susceptibility to and/or contribute to disease.
The water supplied to many caged birds is frequently heavily contaminated with bird faeces, and to a lesser extent, algae.

Galvanised metal water containers, often with lead rich solder are frequently sold and used and are likely to be associated with chronic heavy metal poisoning of those who drink from them.

Shelter implies a secure place where one can move out of extremes of sunlight, heat, cold, wind, rain, and where the risk of predation, the risk of exposure to infectious

disease and vermin is minimised . Many cages and aviaries are constructed and positioned such that they fail to provide shelter on the basis of one or more of these criteria.

Shelter should also imply protection from exposure to unnatural photoperiods* except where it is part of management of disease. Some will want the insertion of a clause to the effect of " except where it is part of management of production" , for example as it applies to egg production. *photoperiod is a term for the cyclical changing of the duration and intensity of natural light and darkness which occurs with the seasons of the year and the phases of the moon. Currently it is likely that most pet birds are extensively exposed to irregular and often prolonged unnatural periods of artificial light which is likely to have adverse affects on health via the pituitary gland, thyroid glands and gonads. Moulting irregularities are one such affect.

Exercise should include the opportunity to fly in the range of ways demonstrated by non-captive birds of the same species. This opportunity is currently denied to many if not most captive and pet birds. People who allow their pet birds to fly about within their house on a daily basis are probably doing as much as can reasonably be expected at this time to provide the opportunity to exercise. However, there are some people with bonded pet birds which are allowed to fly outside their homes. Racing pigeons are a very obvious example but there are also pet sulphur crested cockatoos, corellas and various parrots in the community which are given "freedom" regularly but choose to return to "captivity". (There are many questions, risks, and other matters that one can ask and raise for consideration here!)

Space for what? Space to exercise, space to get away from a dominant or aggressive cage mate, space in which to preen or sun bake, space to display normal courting and breeding repertoires and behaviour, space for ???? It becomes apparent that most captive birds, especially pet birds are denied "space".

3. **Health care, including vaccination, parasite control and professional veterinary treatment where necessary.**

This should apply for caged and pet birds, although at present in Australia we have paucity of relevant vaccines available. We hope to soon have a commercially available inactivated vaccine against Psittacine Circovirus Disease (Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease).

Veterinary surgeons throughout Australia are increasingly being given easily accessible opportunities to become familiar with basic and more advanced health care as it applies to birds. Veterinary surgeons are increasingly availing themselves of these opportunities and there have been dramatic changes in the profession in this area within the past 5-10 years.

The time has arrived when the profession can now announce to and advertise to the public that there are vets available within traveling distance of most people, who are likely to be able to advise preventative medicine and management, and help "save the lives" of many sick birds provided there help is sought promptly.

4. **Identification so that the animal can be safely returned if it is lost.**

This can apply but will be contentious in some circumstances. Currently the most practical method of identification of birds is the implantation of a microchip. The costs associated with this technology are decreasing, but the implantation procedure may be associated with pain and discomfort (if done without anaesthesia) and in small species may involve an unacceptable risk of death. Should we discriminate between aviary finches, soft bills, canaries, and common species maintained in aviaries as distinct from those maintained as pets?

Leg bands are commonly used by aviculturists but are more susceptible to fraud, and are often associated with irritation of the banded leg. Strictures of the circulation to the distal leg, associated with pain, disease and sometimes gangrene of the foot and death, can result if people responsible for birds with leg bands fitted fail to remain alert for and recognise keratin accumulating under the ring.

Other methods of identification such as wing tags may be applicable to large birds.

5. **Breeding controls to ensure the health of the mother animal and the well being of offspring. Desexing of animals is encouraged unless they are specifically kept for breeding purposes.**

Breeding controls as implied by the Green Paper, i.e. restricting the number of progeny bred, are rarely an issue in terms of ensuring the health of the mother and her offspring, in the context of caged and aviary birds. However, there is at least one area which should receive our attention and the attention and influence of the wider community. In recent years Australia has permitted and facilitated the introduction of large numbers of a foreign bird for exhibition which appears to be a charactiture of a budgerigar. Many of these birds and their progeny have an extremely short life-expectancy, as short as 1.5-3 years, (as well as other problems such as Megabacteria-Associated-Disease and incapacities in terms of flight and being able to avoid faecal contamination of their feathers around their “backside”). As might be expected, many of the progeny fail to meet “exhibition” or “show” standards, and therefore are being passed off to pet shops and the unsuspecting public as birds suitable as pets. One can but hope that the ethics and morality of those perpetuating this behaviour will be reviewed and reconsidered by those concerned.

Breeding controls as implied by the Green Paper should be applied to breeders of birds with genetically based incapacities such as very short life expectency, feather cysts (e.g. in canaries), feather dusters (in budgerigars), other feathering defects which impair the ability to behave naturally.

On the other hand, the overall rate of captive breeding of caged and aviary birds is appalling, with notable exceptions. Failure to provide circumstances and facilities to permit intermittent breeding is frequently linked to disease and disease. Failure to breed many species in captivity on a regular basis has placed continuing pressures on many wild bird populations via illicit trapping and smuggling. The time appears to be rapidly approaching when the majority of the community will consider it cruel to keep a bird of a flocking species isolated by itself without a compatible companion of the same species and opposite sex. It may follow that the majority of the community think it cruel, if

birds are to be kept in cages, that they are not given facilities and opportunity to breed and raise one clutch at least once every 1-2 years provided they are medically fit.

Surgical "desexing" of caged and aviary birds at this point of time is not applicable and not practical in most species. However, the technology which gives us the potential to chemically "desex" individuals exists, but is frought with moral, ethical and legal problems which remain unresolved.

All carers have a responsibility to provide the community with:

6. **Respect for the rights of other animal carers and for people who do not own companion animals.**

This should apply to bird keepers (including aviculturists, pigeon fanciers, pigeon racers and pet bird owners).

Some people object to neighbours' racing pigeons landing on their house and other structures and contaminating them with faeces and other debris. It is known that accumulations of old pigeon faeces can create an unhealthy culture medium for cryptococcus which can be associated with disease in susceptible people. Other agents of infectious diseases with zoonotic potential can be carried by pigeons. A recent survey in Sydney indicated a high incidence of Chlamydia infection in sampled feral rock pigeons, yet despite the very close association between people, pigeons and their droppings in some locations such as inner city parks, the incidence of diagnosed avian chlamydiosis ("psittacosis") in people seems to be very low. Risk factors need to be placed and kept in context with other risks associated with day to day living.

Vermin (especially rats and mice) attracted and multiplied by poor aviary hygiene and sanitation, and careless or thoughtless disposal of waste seed can result in complaints and sometimes direct adverse actions by unhappy neighbours.

Some people are disturbed by bird vocalisations. The sounds of roosters crowing and peacocks calling appear to irritate many disturbed souls. Screeching cockatoos and noisy parrots may also disturb some people. The perception of such sounds as disturbances probably indicates or identifies people with cluttered or already stressed disturbed and/or intolerant minds, but be that as it may, the disturbance is real to such people.

7. **Protection from nuisance and injury caused by their companion animal.**

This should apply.
Some nuisance factors are mentioned above.
Caged and aviary birds are rarely the cause of injury except when people foolishly tempt fate by poking their fingers through the cage wire of cockatoos.

Occasionally free flying pet cockatoos and corellas which have become bonded to individual people will behave as if jealous, particularly during the breeding season, and show aggression towards other people with whom "their mate" may be talking. Such birds may fly directly at the face of people or land on their head and start biting their scalps.

8. **Protection of other companion animals, livestock and native animals, from their companion animal.**

This clause does not seem to have application with respect to most caged and aviary birds except in terms of ensuring that they are not a source of infectious disease to other animals, especially our native birds.

9. **Protection from stray, dumped and uncared for animals by ensuring responsible breeding practices.**

This applies, but fortunately with few exceptions, such as sulphur crested cockatoos being abandoned (released purposely) in mass for political reasons in eastern Sydney by bird trappers trying to create anti-cockatoo sentiments in city people so that they are more likely to support export of live cockatoos, the problem of stray, dumped and uncared for birds is as yet minor.

<u>All members of the community have a responsibility to provide animals and their carers with:</u>

10. **Recognition of the benefits that come from keeping companion and working animals.**

This certainly applies to keeping birds as companion animals, however "working birds"..... ? Perhaps we can think of those that perform tricks in circuses?

The non-bird owning community is likely to be largely unaware of and lacking understanding of the fact that there are many individuals and families in our community who treat their companion birds with the same attention and compassion that they would give a human member of the family. Many pet birds in the community are treated as surrogate children; others are the most important companion of aged and lonely individuals, and help maintain their sanity and will to live. These observations parallel those better publicised and well-known aspects of human behaviour towards other pets such as cats and dogs.

11. **Respect for the rights of companion animals and their carers.**

This applies.

In my opinion, "within reason", people should be allowed to step outside commonly accepted behavioural patterns provided they do not cause pain or suffering or disadvantage others, present or future. Education, and promoting a deeper understanding, love and compassion for Life, is likely to change more peoples' behaviour towards raising the standards of care for caged and aviary birds and other animals than waiving a big stick at them and imposing laws upon them. Therefore, we should offer to educate and teach in most cases where people act contrary to predominant opinions, and at the same time be prepared to listen to and carefully evaluate and perhaps learn from their reasons and points of view, before we threaten them with impositions and the law.

12. **The expectation that responsible standards of companion animal care will be enforced.**

This applies but it is a sad reflection on our present society that the concept of enforcement seems necessary. See above comments.

Whereas considerable progress has occurred in recent years educating people about what constitutes "responsible standards of companion animal care" for dogs and to a lesser extent cats, in my opinion there remains a great deal of ignorance and apathy about "responsible standards of companion and caged bird care". Hopefully, this paper when reviewed and refined, and made widely available, will help change that for the betterment of all.

Identifying with the needs of caged birds and using Nature as our guide to contrast "desirable practices" with currently common captive management practices.

The majority of species of birds we confine to cages are flock species, that is, given the opportunity they congregate together to form flocks in the wild. From this and other evidence we can surmise that most birds normally like the company of other birds of their own kind.

It is currently common practice to isolate and keep isolated many individual pet birds for life with no close contact with their own kind. Perhaps, they might hear the wild birds of their own kind and their 'cousins" "talking" as they fly past, for better or worse? (I wonder if birds feel what we call "hope"?)

It is no longer acceptable to thinking aware people to confine to isolation individuals of those species which form flocks in Nature.

Provided there is adequate food and nesting sites are available most mature birds (of the species we commonly keep captive) in the wild breed one or more clutches a year.

The need to reproduce is both inborn and a major complex activity in the life of birds.

We should attempt to cater for this need. This involves bringing together compatible pairs of birds of the same species and opposite sex, preferably while they are still immature, and then providing all the facilities they need to breed at the appropriate time of the year, i.e. prior to and during the breeding season. Those facilities may be simple or complex and can for example include a choice of nesting logs and boxes with different orientations, nesting materials, altered diet, firm stable perches suitable for gripping during mating, privacy and security, and more. The technology to quickly make information about bird breeding and management in captivity is now available to millions via the Internet. A useful address for future reference is likely to be http://pwr.com/exoticinfolink with subheadings Advances, Avian Examiner, Exotic Petcare, Clinicians' Notebook, Wingers publishing, Resources. Raidal@numbat.murdoch.edu.au is another more local site re avian health.

Most birds should be given the opportunity to produce and raise 1-2 clutches every 1-2 years. To achieve this in reality will require important changes in public attitudes and cage and aviary bird management.

Some species of birds we keep in cages become territorial during the breeding season.

This has relevance to the maximum number and variety of birds that should be confined to a given space, i.e. a certain sized aviary.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to include a treatise on compatible and incompatible species and their caging and breeding requirements. There is a great deal of knowledge within members of our community but it is not always easy to locate such knowledge quickly. An increasing number of veterinarians have knowledge of an increasing number of species. Within the avicultural community there are well-known highly respected individuals with a wealth of knowledge. Similar individuals can be found within the zoo and fauna park industry.

It is just as important for the welfare of caged birds that dominant species have the opportunity to establish territories as it is for less dominant or more specialised species to have their needs met.

It is common for the needs of many individuals and species to change dramatically during the breeding season, and the bird keeping public need to be educated about this and be alert for the need to change captive management at this time.

Birds in a flock usually have a pecking order. In the wild birds low in the pecking order usually have the opportunity to move away and/or hide from those higher up in the pecking order, and thus they are able to reduce the stress and distress they would otherwise be subject to. However, under common current management conditions, these options are often not available to captive birds.

We need to prevent overcrowding of aviaries and to be alert to prevent distress in birds lower in the pecking order. We can take steps to minimise the probability of this by providing a series of visual barriers and "hiding spots" within larger aviaries, and we can also supply multiple feeding and watering points, multiple perches in multiple shelter areas etc.

As for the birds in many pet shops, the stressful (very close to strangers (shoppers)), overcrowded and confined conditions to which they are so often subjected without so much as a question from so many is an indication of the level of ignorance which needs to be highlighted in our community.

The progeny of some species of birds remain with their parents and share the territory of their parents for a number of years, whereas those of other species are normally driven away relatively quickly after fledging.

Fledglings which fall into the second category should be placed in a separate aviary before they are subjected to parental attacks and injury.

A feature of birds with few exceptions is that in health as sub-adults and adults they can fly. Most of the species we keep in captivity can and do in the wild fly long distances as part of their daily routine. Regular adequate exercise is a pre-requisite for remaining healthy, vigorous, and fit, and for developing stamina.

The opportunity for sustained flight is denied to the great majority of captive birds. The opportunity for flight at all is denied to many by confinement to cages of dimensions and shapes totally inadequate to allow flight, by wing clipping, by leg chaining, and sometimes, horror of horrors, by pinioning (the amputation of part of a wing or the fusion of a wing joint to purposely permanently disable the bird's ability to fly).

The only birds that should not be given all the facilities necessary for flight are those that have suffered permanent accidental incapacity through injury such as a severely broken wing or through disease such as some forms of circovirus-associated disease.

The opportunity for daily flights should be provided for birds maintained in captivity. This will necessitate a major "rethink" by many, in terms of how they "house" their birds.

Wing clipping should be discouraged; pinioning and use of leg chains might well be considered "acts of cruelty" by most and "acts of ignorance" by some.

The mental and emotional capacity of birds is underestimated and belittled by many, and erroneously many people assume caged birds have few needs apart from a fresh supply of food and water and protection from extremes of weather.

Dr. X. T. Barber has compiled a great deal of evidence in his book "The Human Nature of Birds" which indicates among other things that birds can have emotional needs and responses similar to our own and that some can develop an extensive and meaningful human language capacity in addition to their "native tongue".

Unfortunately it is extremely common for caged and aviary birds and many pet birds in Australia to be deprived of the opportunity to develop and exhibit their mental capacities and emotional needs. A great deal needs to be done to rectify this. Reading the above book could be a good starting point.

We need to review and change our basic attitudes towards birds, and if we elect to confine them to captivity, then we should make every opportunity to enrich their lives and cater for their needs as best we can.

In Nature, wild birds have free choice to land and stand upon a very wide variety of branches of different diameters, contours and surface textures. They also have the opportunity to choose the texture of the ground upon which they walk.

Most pre-fabricated cages are supplied with cylindrical or oval wooden or plastic doweling perches of uniform dimensions, contour and texture. These predispose and/or contribute to disease of the feet (pododermatitis and "bumblefoot") and elsewhere (e.g. along the legs, in the kidneys) in passerine and psittacine birds, if not supplemented with or substituted by perches with features of natural branches.

Sandpaper sleeves to fit over doweling perches and highly abrasive sandpaper and grit paper sheets to fit on the floor of cages are promoted and sold by many pet shops but exert adverse effects on the health of birds obliged to walk or stand on them.

No longer acceptable aspects of keeping birds in cages.

Cage Size

It is no longer acceptable to cage a perching bird long term in a cage with only one perch. It is no longer acceptable to cage a perching bird long term in a cage which does not provide room for it to fly between perches in an approximately horizontal plane. It is not acceptable to confine a bird to a cage where there is insufficient room for it to fully extend its wings and to fly without damaging wings or feathers on the walls or ceiling of the cage.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the minimum width of a cage for a pair of birds should be three times their combined wing span.

   The minimum length of a cage should permit at least "x" wing beats (the more the better, but at very least x=2) between perches placed far enough from the ends of the cage so as to permit the birds to turn around on the perches without scraping their tail feathers against the cage.

   The minimum height of a cage should be three times the length from head to tip of tail of the largest bird to be confined in it, and should be increased accordingly if more than one pair or more than one species is kept in the cage.

   The cage should be constructed or positioned such that at least one perch is at standing shoulder height (for the sense of security of the birds).

Cage materials

Zinc, copper, lead, chromium and heavy metal poisoning. Birds should not be kept in cages with untreated galvanised wire, or with other sources of heavy metals, including solder used for example in the construction of many metal water and food containers. Lead based paints should not be used.

Rusty cages which had previously been galvanised, chrome plated and/or painted are unsuitable as they pose an increased risk of heavy metal poisoning. Chromed wire frames to support stainless steel food and water containers corrode and become another source of toxins, and therefore should not be used unless in perfect order.

Mirrors are frequently sold by pet shops to be put in bird cages. Many mirrors sold for this purpose lack protection on the reverse side to prevent the bird from getting mercury poisoning. Such mirrors should not be used.

Recommendations

Galvanised wire should be scrubbed with vinegar and a wire brush to dislodge loose fragments and remove surface salts, dried thoroughly then given several layers of an acrylic paint (preferably black) to minimize the risk of poisoning.

Cage wire manufacturers, especially BHP, should be further encouraged to

produce and market a non-toxic bird wire just as soon as possible. The AAV should if necessary seek the help of other associations and organisations such as the RSPCA, Animal Welfare League, CSIRO etc. to agitate to bring about appropriate changes.

Staff and owners of pet shops should be informed about the hazards of what they so commonly sell, and be given incentive to stop selling hazardous products. (Similar principles to hazardous toys for children.)

Acrylic cages

Cages made of acrylics, plastic, perspex and the like, should permit adequate ventilation.

Bamboo and cane cages. These cages are almost impossible to clean and properly disinfect. The cages are usually insecure and are usually very small. They are especially unsuitable in a country where robust well designed cages are available.

Cage shapes

So called "bubble cages" are "plastic" sphere shaped enclosures with diameters usually less than 1.5 metres. These cages are usually sold with a litter or potted soil substrate occupying the lower half or third of the sphere. The upper half of the sphere is supplied with air vents and access doors. These cages are generally recognised by avian veterinarians as being totally unsuitable for housing live birds.

Recommendation

That it be considered cruel and/or ignorant and/or illegal to confine, exhibit or house live birds in such cages. Advice be included in pamphlet on purchasing cages that dome shaped and/or bubble" cages are totally unsuitable for live birds (and are illegal if the latter becomes true).

Cylindrical cages. Small cylindrical cages are currently being sold in apparently large numbers for caged and aviary birds but do little to provide for the needs of birds in terms of room for flight (birds are not helicopters!) or in terms of good hygiene (it is very difficult to arrange the perches so that poop from a bird on the top perch misses birds, perches, food and water containers below). They are unsuitable for confining birds long term.

Similar comments apply to the large cylindrical cages sold to confine cockatoos.

Cylindrical cages may have a role when transporting birds, as they may fit into cars more easily than other shaped cages.

Recommendation

Pet shops be obliged to display and/or provide cage purchasing customers with information to the effect of that written above. Pyramid or triangular shaped cages. Such cages are usually very small, have a single perch, and are traditionally used to confine individual song birds in parts of Asia. They appear to be uncommon in Australia.

Recommendation

The confinement of a bird or birds in such cages be considered and act of cruelty and/or ignorance and be made illegal in Australia and in the meantime information be included in a brochure to be distributed by vets and in pet shops to the effect that their use is considered cruel and inhumane in Australian culture.

Cuboidal Cockatoo cages.

These routinely fail to meet the most basic needs of cockatoos and similar sized birds in terms of size, dimensions, the unprotected galvanised wire, perches, and the solder used to seal the metal food and water containers usually sold with the cages.

Recommendation

It be considered an act of cruelty and/or ignorance and perhaps be made illegal to have a cockatoo in such a cage, albeit temporarily, without also owning or having direct access to a much larger cage of dimensions and structure suitable for housing the bird, unless such bird has just been caught or rescued, or is under active veterinary care.

Budgie Cages. Most but not all commercially produced budgerigar cages fail to meet the minimum standards recommended in terms of size and dimensions. Some have wire painted with paint that is a source of lead and/or zinc. Many are insecure, especially if tilted to one side, and lack a latch or securing device on “doors” for hand, seed and water.

Recommendation

That the AAV, perhaps in conjunction with other organizations, lobby cage manufacturers both here in Australia and overseas, to produce and market cages that better provide for the needs of the birds they are to confine. That the AAV produce a pamphlet listing “good points” and “bad points” to look for and consider when selecting a bird cage and seek the cooperation of the pet shop and other retail industries in making this information available. That the AAV (Australian Committee) establish a www site on the Internet for promoting the health and welfare of caged birds.

Canary Cages

Cages suitable for housing budgerigars are usually suitable for housing canaries and are available but usually not purchased. Canaries and finches are sometimes housed in bamboo and/or cane cages. See comments about their unsuitability, above.

Aviaries

There are many manufacturers of bird aviaries who use fine thin meshed untreated galvanised wire in their construction and sell the aviaries to unsuspecting individuals without advice about treating the wire or the size of birds for which the wire is suited.

Many of the larger parrots and virtually all the cockatoos are capable in health of bending and often breaking fine bird wire with their beaks, thus predisposing heavy metal poisoning,

foreign body ingestion and escape.

Recommendations

A pamphlet be designed by the AAV in conjunction with RSPCA or whoever to be attached to all commercially available cages for sale which warns and educates customers about the need to minimise the risk of heavy metal poisoning and the risks of confining parrots and cockatoos with powerful beaks in aviaries and cages made from inappropriately fine gauge wire. Cage and aviary siting or positioning and aspects of design. Provision of shade and shelter from extremes of heat and cold. Bird cages and aviaries should be positioned and built such that birds in them can move out of direct sunlight and perch in shade at any time of the day. Most small cages are designed to be kept indoors and most do not have a solid opaque roof, yet it is common practice for people to place such cages and the birds therein outside the house for part of the day. An opaque preferably water proof material should be positioned around the cage on 3 sides as well as above it to ensure the birds receive adequate protection in the event of them being perhaps accidentally left outside all day.

Birds in small cages should be protected from extremes of heat and cold by moving the cage to an appropriate area within the house or shedding. Many prefabricated commercially available aviaries are constructed of sheet metal and bird wire. During heat waves the roof and walls can absorb and radiate a great deal of heat. Perches need to be placed far enough below the roof to allow the birds to perch in the coolest part of the aviary. It is advisable that the roof of such aviaries be insulated in a manner which prevents the birds having access to the insulating materials. A bird bath or shower may be added to the aviary to provide facilities for birds to cool themselves. Aviaries in localities subject to frosts and cold weather need to have an area enclosed on at least 3 and perhaps 3.5 sides which is insulated and if necessary is fitted with heating, perhaps in the form of an infra-red lamp. Alternative they may be totally enclosed within a larger structure such as a shed. Provision of shelter from rain and wind. Birds should be given the opportunity if possible to expose themselves to rain and wind as desired, such as with an open flight area attached to or as part of an aviary, but equally if not more importantly, need to be provided with an appropriate shelter area. Measures to provide shade and also provide necessary shelter from rain and wind. Provision of security from predators and other sources of fear, fright or panic.

Cages and aviaries need to be constructed and/or positioned so as to provide protection against and security from predators and sources of fear, fright or panic.

Some of the more commonly recognised potential predators, depending on locality and species of captive birds, include cats, foxes, dogs, rats, snakes, goannas, predatory birds such as hawks and other raptors, owls, kookaburras, butcher birds, currawongs, crows and magpies, Tiger quolls and Tasmanian Devils.

In addition to the above, possums, especially brush tailed possums, fruit bats (flying foxes), mice and some children can be classified as “sources of fear, fright or panic”.
Advice re aviary construction can be obtained from avian and zoo veterinarians and some experienced aviculturists.

Protection from fumes and pollutants.

Cages and aviaries need to be positioned so that birds within them are not exposed to cigarette or other smoke, car exhaust or cooking fumes and other air-borne pollutants and toxins.

Cages and aviaries should be maintained free from moulds and high levels of air-borne fungal spores. Cages and aviaries should be maintained so as to minimise air-borne dust and dander.
Cage security

All doors and access openings for food, water and cleaning trays should be designed such that they totally prevent caged birds from being able to open them
Small portable cages should remain secure if dropped from 2 metres, as can accidentally happen. In particular the plastic floor included in the design of many available cages should be strong enough to withstand impact of this nature.

Many cages currently available are manufactured such that they pack into thin flat boxes and are assembled by the purchaser or vendor. Many of these have very weak interlocking devices which render the cages very fragile and likely to pull apart accidentally very easily.

Cage safety. Many cages currently on sale have some wire bars which are so close together as to readily entrap toes and predispose injury. These bars are usually located at the sides or ends of cage panels. Cage design of the future needs to eliminate these hazards. Some cages have sharp pointed ends of wire protruding into the cage. Some cages have almost razor sharp edges to metal sheeting exposed where caged birds are likely to try to grip them, with obvious risk of severe injury.

Many people are unaware of the hazards associated with the use of fine tie wire within cages for various purposes, particularly in cages used to house large parrots and cockatoos. Many toys sold to be installed within bird cages are totally inappropriate from health and bird safety perspectives.

Recommendations

Minimum cage standards be established and an independent quality rating system be established which can be used to help the public distinguish well designed quality cages from poorly designed low quality cages. Consideration should be given to the above points when developing a rating score for bird cages. A similar system should be established for cage furniture and add-ons. The opportunity for the Association of Avian Veterinarians to lead the way and to co-operate and advise industry on these matters should be persued.

The Single Deprived Bird Syndrome

Single birds deprived of company and the opportunity to breed commonly become diseased.
Many problems = A very significant part of bird practice. There are numerous inquiries and consultations in day to day avian veterinary practice which relate to this area of management.
Many of these relate to what is considered to be abnormal behaviour when compared with the behaviour of birds in the wild, and birds with compatible companions and the opportunity to breed. Examples can include some cases of aggression, unpredictability in behaviour, screeching and vocalising excessively, destructive behaviour, courting and overt sexual behaviour associated with mental fixation or bonding to inanimate objects such as mirrors, bells, other toys, or even a small protruberance on a branch or perch, champagne corks,

feather dusters and many more, and animate objects such as “owners” or various parts thereof (commonly the head hair of women), sometimes other household pets! In addition there are many cases where physical disease can be attributed in part to failure of the “owner” to provide the bird with a compatible companion of the opposite sex and same species and the facilities to encourage breeding etc. Examples will include some cases of feather picking and self-mutilation, oviduct and ovarian disorders, egg-binding, egg peritonitis, excessive egg laying, testicular disease (especially tumours, in my opinion), obesity, fatty liver disease, lipomas and lipofibromas, pododermatitis and bumblefoot (aggravated by inactivity, obesity, poor liver metabolism and circulation etc.), heavy metal poisoning (“strange” how it seems to be more common during the breeding season, or could it be linked with natural bird behaviour to chew nesting materials, hollow out logs etc.?) if one takes a holistic view of disease and health. In many instances, displacement and other adaptive behavioural patterns exhibited by single birds are not recognised for what they are, but are just seen as funny, cute and amusing antics.

Masturbation by male birds and posturing by female birds as explained in more detail in appended Client sheets on Randy Birds, may be obvious to us, but not recognised by many owners. (“Do they really do that?!”).

Over-eating, especially during the breeding season, and the subsequent development of obesity, fatty liver disease and some tumours (lipomas, lipofibromas) might not so obviously be linked to not having a mate to feed, eggs to lay and chicks to feed and fledge.
Pacing back and forward. Somersaulting in the corner of a cage. Scraping beak up and down bars of cage for extended periods repeatedly. Affinity with one member of family, or with one sex within family, and aggression to other sex. Bouncing up and down on perch, especially corellas. Head bobbing

Successful match-making for birds often requires the patience, the perceptiveness and conditions which parallel those for people! There are no hard and fast rules but consider the following generalisations. Birds usually prefer birds of the same species, similar age, opposite sex as “mates”. However homosexual or bisexual behaviour is common in some species such as peachface lovebirds which can sometimes appear to take turns in role-play, if deprived of the opportunity to mix it with the opposite sex! Many species of birds, especially cockatoos, are likely to fight almost immediately, if thrown together in the usually small cage inhabited for some time by one of the birds.

They are less likely to fight if allowed to eye each other off at a distance, e.g. during the quarantine period, then allowed the opportunity to move out of their respective cages of their own free will into “neutral territory” such as a large room or large aviary in which both the cages have been placed.

Partnerships are more likely to develop quickly in a social situation (a flock of birds) where there is a choice of both sexes and various age and the opportunity to come together briefly, move away, consider, come together, and share, (not unlike a party or barbeque for us!) than if we choose the partner for the lone bird. However factors related to quarantine and disease control and prevention often preclude such a choice in practice, at least as far as pet birds are concerned!

Diet

The diet usually offered to caged birds has little resemblance to that consumed by wild birds of the same species, at least before "modern agriculture" (last 200 years). In Australia budgerigars and small parrots age usually offered "budgerigar mix" as their staple diet, while larger parrots and cockatoos are offered "parrot mix". These "mixes" commonly contain 6-8 different varieties of seeds and minimal leaf, fruit, stem or insect material, whereas in the wild the birds are likely to consume over a year much wider range of foods, including insects and their larvae accidentally and/or as the opportunity arises.

Parrots and cockatoos offered a limited range of seed ad lib which includes access to sunflower seeds often become "sunflower seed addicts" and select and consume virtually all available sunflower seeds before eating anything else. This results in mess from scattered and wasted seed and a very unbalanced diet for the birds. Obesity, poor muscle development, fatty liver disease, poor calcification of bones and the development of lipomas and lipofibromas may be associated with chronic "sunflower seed addicts".

If seed mixes are to be fed to parrots and cockatoos they should be free from sunflower seeds and offered for a restricted time frame, say .5-1 hour, morning and evening, and removed from the cage for the remainder of the time, during which they are replaced by a bouquet of a wide variety seeding green grasses, thistles, dandelions and a mixed salad of household vegetables, but never avocado, green potato, rhubarb leave or seeding grasses infected with ergot moulds as these are all potentially poisonous. (Paspalum seed heads are often affected this way.)

Well formulated parrot pellets or crumbles e.g. Roudybush products, may also be offered throughout the day provided obesity is not already a problem. Sunflower seeds should be limited in quantity, say 10 seeds a day, perhaps offered as a treats or rewards , or put in a separate container. In situations where birdkeepers choose not to learn how to identify and recognise suitable seeding grasses and other plants, and to include a range of them in the daily diet, well formulated bird crumbles or pellets should gradually replace all seed diets.

Seed bells, hooks, glues and moulds.

Seed bells often contain a restricted mixture of seeds including sunflower seeds and relevant comments above also apply here. The hook which allows the seed bell to be attached to a cage or branch is often found to be a bent piece of wire with very sharp ends. The lower end is especially dangerous to birds when exposed after overlying seed has been removed. Birds have impaled themselves on such wire hooks. The sale of seed bells contained wire hooks should be considered cruel and irresponsible. The seed mix of some seed bells in held together with wood glues such as "Aquahere". It seems most inappropriate to encourage birds to eat such chemicals and the production, sale and feeding of such bells is considered to be ill-advised and inappropriate. Many seed bells become mouldy in part before they are consumed, and when the mouldy food is eaten they contribute to acute and/or chronic liver disease (aflatoxicosis) and immunosuppression. We need to educate the public about the above hazards and to caution people about providing their birds with seed bells.

Surgical Devocalisation of birds

Bird vets are often asked to devocalise birds, especially to stop roosters crowing, cockatoos

screeching and peacocks calling. Devocalise: nice word, isn't it?! … sort of sounds OK?! But let's explain a little. A bird's voice box or syrinx is not up the top of its neck where it is easy to access. The syrinx is located just in front of where the windpipe divides near the base of the heart, within the chest. In cockatoos and Psittacine birds it is particular difficult to access. Devocalisation involves severely damaging the syrinx by burning it with heat, by burning it chemically, or by radiosurgery. This in itself is painful, but very often closely adjacent structures such as the food pipe are also damaged. Death can come quickly or slowly but many birds do die from this procedure. It is inhumane on several grounds.

Birds communicate a lot with their voice … the fact that they keep calling is usually an indication that their needs are not being met. Some birds are territorial and are obviously unsuited to being kept confined where intolerant people live.

Intolerance to natural behaviour of birds and other animals is a state of mind; often a state of maladjustment and an indicator of a state of dis-stress brought on by other factors.
I recommend that surgical devocalisation of birds be an act of cruelty and owning or having in possession devocalised birds be illegal.

Pinioning

Pinioning is the permanent mutilation of one or both wings such that the bird is disabled from ever flying again (in this life!). Pinioning usually involves amputating part of the wing and this is often done while the bird is young without anaesthesia or analgesia (pain relief).

Some pet birds and many birds in zoos in open displays (where they don't look as though they are in a cage) are pinioned! (so they don't fly away is their justification for this!) On one hand we have this policy, and yet most zoos will not at this point in time display recognisably incapacitated animals which can be provided with quality of life in a protected environment. We have WIRES with a policy that results in the killing of most birds which are not releasable back to the wild. Many of these birds could adapt to their injury or incapacity in a protected environment, many could still breed and many could teach us heaps about life. Many could replace those that can fly that are confined to display cages for life. Many could replace those that would otherwise be pinioned.

Purposely maiming a bird for non-medical reasons by amputation of part of its wing(s) or by otherwise fusing or restricting wing join movement permanently should be an act of cruelty.

Leg chains

Leg chains and their attachments can get tangled around the bird, around other objects and hence become much shorter than intended. They can lead to the bird hanging by the leg, suffering agonizing injuries and breaking its leg. The leg attachment can abrade or cut into the leg. I advocate that the use of leg chains on birds be deemed an act of cruelty.

Many mistakes in management of caged and aviary birds are made through ignorance, through not having thought, through not having been taught, or through not having questioned. Birds are not simply animals in terms of objects which move, live, look pretty, eat, drink, fly (if they are lucky) and die! Birds have many needs which parallel our own. Birds have feelings. Birds are individuals in a similar way to us, they have individual personalities, likes and dislikes.

Birds can think. Birds can solve some problems. Birds can discriminate, recognise differences. Birds can learn. Some birds can learn basic English and ask questions with meaning and purpose. We need to carefully re-appraise our attitudes towards birds!

Sandpaper

Sandpaper sleeves should never be fitted around perches; they have no place in good management of birds. Why? Sandpaper sleeves around perches fail to keep the nails or claws of birds which stand on them short, but do exert an abrasive effect on the weight bearing part of the feet, predisposing and aggravating infection of the feet and "bumblefoot".

It is not natural for arboreal parrots and cockatoos to spend prolonged time standing on abrasive surfaces. When such surfaces are on a cylindrical perch their adverse effect is concentrated onto the ball of the foot and sometimes the plantar surface of the lower leg where the bird bears most weight.
A length of sandpaper sleeve may be fitted to a vertical bar of a cage to act as a source of insoluble and/or soluble grit, but one needs to question this practice also as there is minimal quality control in terms of the safety and appropriateness or otherwise of the glues used to hold the grit onto the cardboard.

Most birds eating whole seeds as part of their diets are likely to benefit from the provision in loose form, i.e. in a small container, of small quantities of both shell grit (soluble grit, a source of calcium and various trace elements) and insoluble sand grit (mini-boulders, which in a healthy gizzard are used to grind the seeds to paste).

Lorikeets and seed eating birds on a 100% well-balanced crumble or pelleted food diet probably do not need sand grits in their diet, and may not need shell grits either. Birds with Megabacteria-Associated disease of the proventriculus and gizzard should not be given grits until they have had time to heal.

Doweling Perches.

Doweling perches are provided with most new cages. Most of these are cylindrical, uniform and smooth. How often in Nature do birds find equivalent perches? Doweling perches are unsuitable for long term use for birds and together with other aspects of mismanagement often lead to crippling pododermatitis and bumblefoot. They should be replaced with clean, natural non-toxic branches with "character", varying diameters, contours and surface textures.

In turn these natural branches should be replaced with new natural branches as perches as the bark from the older ones is stripped away and/or the birds chew through them, or if they become fouled with faeces. Soft wood branches, although much less durable than hardwood branches, are considered preferable, as they encourage the birds to use their beaks and can provide "distraction or displacement therapy", i.e. decoy the birds away from chewing cage wire and their own feathers.

Wing clipping is becoming less acceptable.

Currently the practice of wing clipping is considered by most people, both veterinary surgeons and the "general public", to be an ethical and necessary procedure. However, more and more people are questioning our assumed right to clip birds' wings and are placing the birds' needs before or on a par with those of their owners. They generally recognise, and I believe rightly, that birds should be given the opportunity to fly and to keep fit, and if their "owner" is not

prepared or is unable to provide this opportunity regularly, then the birds should not be owned by that person.

Wing clipping is commonly performed at the point of sale of birds, many of which are immature at that time, as an aid to taming the birds. However, the same effect, albeit in an almost instantaneously reversible form, can be achieved by taping the bird's wings.

In my opinion, short-term, (less than 2 week so as to limit the risk of degenerative joint pathology), temporary taping of a bird's wing(s) so as to inhibit or prevent flight, is far preferable to wing clipping, and should be offered as an alternative, when one can be reasonably certain that the bird will be unable to chew through or otherwise remove the tape within the specified time frame.

Veterinary surgeons are frequently requested to clip the wing or wings of pet birds. Wing clipping is usually requested for the purpose of minimising the risks of the bird escaping when it is taken out of its cage or allowed to voluntarily leave its cage. Many people who keep birds in cages currently are not prepared to let their bird(s) out of the cage unless its wings have been clipped. As questioning, thinking veterinary surgeons, we seem to be faced with the choice of not clipping the wing(s) and having the bird left in its cage, or having someone perhaps less adept do the procedure, or we can clip one or both wings, restrict flight, and concurrently find ourselves subject to litigation if the bird subsequently breaks its leg while landing awkwardly! (Be warned, this risk is real!)

Occasionally, wing clipping is performed as a means of managing aggressive, feather picking and/or cannibalistic birds in an aviary context. Wing clipping may involve clipping primary and/or secondary flight feathers from either one or both wings. Bilaterally symmetrical wing clipping usually allows the bird to exert some influence on where it lands, but depending on the number and pattern of feathers clipped, moulting, body condition, height above ground and wind, may sometimes leave the bird with the opportunity to escape.

Unilateral wing clipping, depending on its severity, may more effectively prevent flight but causes the bird to spiral down, and occasionally this will result in injury to the leg and/or wing on the side clipped. There is debate within veterinary circles as to "best procedure" re wing clipping patterns, with some advocating clipping short all primary feathers including those at the tip of the wing(s). Others, including this author, associate with this procedure considerable pain, bruising of the flesh of the tip of the clipped wing, bruising, fracture and haemorrhage from terminal wing blood quills lacking natural splinting by adjacent unclipped mature feathers. If I "must" clip wings, I prefer to leave at least 3 terminal primary flight feathers intact at the tip of each wing, and if necessary clip more secondary flights than would otherwise be necessary.

Tail clipping of birds is also practiced by some members of the public. I discourage this procedure. There are alternatives to wing clipping, and I advocate that these be discussed with clients before wing clipping is performed. Perhaps a flight aviary can be constructed which is big enough to house a table and chairs as well as branches at both ends. Perhaps one or more rooms or verandahs of the house can be screened and made "bird-safe". Perhaps the bird can be provided with a mate in a cage which permits flight, and the bird's needs be put before its owners, as they existed before unquestioned beliefs and attitudes were re-evaluated. Perhaps, especially in the case of single previously trapped cockatoos, corellas and galahs, the owner may choose to have the bird rehabilitated with others of its own kind, e.g. with International Fund for Animal Welfare, prior to release back into the "wild".