

Avian Critical Care Case Study

Sasha Herbert BVSc (Hons)

Wildlife and Exotic Pet Unit
Lort Smith Animal Hospital, 24 Villiers St, North Melbourne

BABOUSHKA

History

Baboushka, a 2-year old bantam hen lived in a suburban back yard with a mixed group of bantam hens. They had free access to the garden and were fed vegetable scraps, grains (wheat and barley), and meal worms. Baboushka, alone in the group became ill. Her owners noted discharge from the nose, eyes and ears and that she had not eaten for two days. They had attempted to syringe feed her but she continued to deteriorate, becoming disoriented and breathing with her beak open. Her owners loved her dearly but had no real understanding of the critical nature of her condition until they resorted to veterinary care. Part of their delay in accessing veterinary care was due to comments from friends that they were crazy to care enough about a chicken to consider veterinary care.

The issues that needed to be dealt with urgently were Baboushka's severe dyspnoea, dehydration and emaciation. However we also needed to delicately address the issue of a guarded prognosis with the owner without distressing them to the point of opting for immediate euthanasia. The costs of the care were of critical concern to the owners, partly due to preconceived ideas about what should be spent on pet chickens, but also due to their own concerns about spending money and emotional energy on a pet that may die despite all of our best efforts. Later we would need to impress upon them the importance of early veterinary care for sick birds without worsening their guilt trip. I also suggested they make other friends who wouldn't be so judgmental about their choice of pet to love!

Examination

Weight: Not recorded

Body condition: emaciated

Respiratory signs: bilateral purulent ocular and nasal discharge. Open beak breathing.

The bird was extremely weak, sitting on her sharp keel and unable to rise.

The owners were informed that her condition was grave. The patient would be stabilized and investigation of the condition would then be considered including evaluation under anesthesia, blood screens and radiology.

Stabilisation

Day 1

Heat

1.30pm. The bird was placed into one of our vivaria and maintained at 30°C for 2 hours. These tanks are kept in our wildlife and exotics unit that is isolated from cat and dog wards, quiet, and can be kept dark when necessary. The room is heated to 24-27°C.

Emergency nutrition

3.30pm 20ml Wombaroo granivore mix by crop tube once Baboushka had settled and her dyspnoea had subsided.

5.30pm feeding was repeated and her discharges clean from eyes and nares. She remained in the heated tank overnight.

Day 2

Transferred to a mesh cage still within the heated wildlife room (24-27°C).

Crop fed 20ml granivore slurry mix 4 hourly during daylight hours.

Twice daily bathing of discharges from eyes and nares with saline soaked gauze.

Physical strength was improving.

Medication

Tribissen orally commenced twice daily 48mg/ml, 2ml/kg. Owners declined culture and sensitivity.

Day 3

Discharges much reduced and more intermittent.

Changed feed to polyaid (no reason recorded). Offered layer pellets in cage but did not eat voluntarily.

Owner asked to bring in some of her usual diet to encourage appetite.

Days 4-7

Baboushka bright, strong, standing, and vocalizing for visiting owner.

Owner consented to blood screen on day 4 however the bird collapsed upon needle puncture and the procedure had to be abandoned.

Discharge became mucous rather than purulent and then disappeared by day 6.

Crop feeding reduced to three times daily, to allow crop to remain empty for longer between feeds and encourage appetite. Owner offered mealworms as these are usually her favourite treat. Initially refused these and the grain mix the owner brought in. Began eating voluntarily on day 5 and appetite returned to normal by day 7.

Antibiotic dose increased to match increase in body weight but weight not recorded.

Day 8

Discharged.

Day 9

Antibiotic course finished at home as tablets for the last two days

Discussion

Aetiology

The cause remained unresolved. The owner declined further investigation.

Baboushka responded to basic symptomatic treatment including physically removing discharges and giving broad spectrum antibiotics.

Her owners offered her plenty of green leafy vegetables and carrots but we do not know whether she chose to eat these. Hence Vitamin A deficiency predisposing her to respiratory infection cannot be ruled out.

Other possible causes include foreign bodies in the nares and viral infections followed by secondary bacterial infections of the sinuses. Underlying disease is unlikely as the condition did not recur and she did not decline with any other illness in the year subsequent to this infection.

Criticism of critical care

The first feed should have been an electrolyte solution by crop tube as she had been neither eating nor drinking and would have been dehydrated. We did not accurately calculate her caloric requirements nor record her daily weight fluctuations. Weight measurements were taken ad hoc and were only recorded on her cage card, not on the computer file. Feed type was changed suddenly from Granivore to Polyaid which was inappropriate for maintenance. This was an oversight in my instruction of the attending nurses.

Monitoring of patient would have been more complete and not much more costly with daily PCV/TP measurements and recording her body weight changes. Basic cytology of the discharges including gram stains before and after antibiotic therapy, would have given us a better indication of whether the antibiotics were effective.