

# Reduce the risks!

How can henkeepers help to keep their birds safe and minimise the risk of contracting and spreading disease? **Grant Brereton** spoke to our poultry vet, **Victoria Roberts**



**N**ow, more than ever, all poultry keepers need to be on the lookout for signs of ill health and diseases in their flock. Whether you are a fancier or backyard keeper, the months of lock-down that began in December last year meant a heightened awareness of the legal requirements and just how quickly

Your beautiful birds are at risk if you don't take precautions. This is a superb New Hampshire Red cockerel  
Photo: Grant Brereton.

such measures can be enforced.

This had a positive effect in some respects. It has made many people cut down on the number of breeds (or birds) kept, in the knowledge that they need an area of shelter and protection from wild birds should the worst happen and a UK outbreak of avian flu is confirmed.

However, it's not just the varying strains of bird flu that need consideration when it comes to vigilance and biosecurity. There are many poultry diseases that can leave a high mortality rate in your flock, which often people are unaware of, or don't want to think about.

It's so easy to bring in a



disease to your flock inadvertently, by acquiring healthy-looking stock which are, in fact, carrying many possible forms of illness. And these days there are so many meet-up and sales groups on social media that buying, selling and swapping birds has never been easier. But what are you buying in? Could it be a pair that will destroy your whole flock?

You might have brought in many different forms of aian species to your property over many decades without a problem, and thankfully most new acquisitions are introduced to your flock without issue, but there's always a first time. It's easy to be flippant about biosecurity and quarantine when everything's going right... until the day it isn't!

**BELOW:** A hen with a respiratory disease

To this end, I sought advice from our specialist poultry vet Victoria Roberts to get the latest advice on how to minimise the risks posed to your precious birds by new arrivals.

**Victoria, many people view a quarantine area as a 'luxury' and a bit of an unnecessary idea. What would you say to that?**

They are potentially risking the health all of the poultry on their premises which may mean the destruction of many years of selecting for a great strain of a particular breed. Having a dedicated quarantine area is not difficult to create and will save lots of heartache.

**What diseases can be passed on through the droppings?**

Almost any viral, bacterial and parasitic disease, but a certain amount of exposure to pathogens keeps the hens' immune system working. The hen huts that are cleaned out every day and are sterile are as bad as those which never get cleaned out: it is the high ammonia of the droppings that is the main problem since it paralyses the small hairs (cilia) in the trachea which move mucus out of the lungs – pathogens do very well indeed in static mucus.

**What diseases have no effect on one avian species (such as waterfowl) yet are deadly to poultry?**

The one we are all aware of now is avian influenza, so keeping up the biosecurity that we got used to earlier in 2017 needs constant attention. Erysipelas (bacteria that is zoonotic and likes heart valves) is one that waterfowl carry without symptoms and chickens and turkeys can get infected with. The main danger is when silt is dug out and spread on pasture; erysipelas is very likely to be flourishing in that. Some intestinal worms can be transferred, as can parasites, so preventative measures such as worming new stock on arrival and treating with DM against parasites will be beneficial.

**What are the latest disinfectants that you recommend for quarantine areas, and how much do they cost?**

Virkon is the best disinfectant as it is licensed for poultry and is not toxic to them as long as it is dry when they get close. Virkon is a powder which must not be inhaled, so using it needs care and only make up a solution for what you immediately need. Is good for footbaths but needs changing regularly and when contaminated with muck. The other disinfectant I like is F10 which comes in all sorts of formulations. Price is sometimes variable; it depends where you look. The internet gives a good general idea of average cost. If something is



*It's easy to be flippant about biosecurity and quarantine when everything's going right... until the day it isn't!*

very cheap it is likely to be a complete waste of money and cause potential harm to you your birds by not doing any required job.

**Aside from bird flu, what other respiratory diseases are deadly for poultry, with most dying in a few days?**

Newcastle disease is the one most people would have heard of. It can be vaccinated against. Infectious laryngotracheitis (ILT) is being seen more, especially in the heavy breeds of chickens and turkeys; again, there is a vaccine. Keep in touch with your vet and get disease diagnosis, don't just bin dead birds and ignore potential problems. Money spent on post-mortems is always useful. Get your vet to teach you or use roadkill (pheasants mainly) to practice on to find out what is normal. Maybe we ought to arrange a post-mortem day in order to teach correct procedure and keep poultry keepers safe too?

**Even if they survive or have been injected with Tylan, for example, does that mean they are carriers of the disease and will pass it on to innocent birds?**

There are no licensed injections for poultry, apart from vaccines, some of which are oral. Hens can be carriers of viral diseases such as Marek's, even if vaccinated. This is one area where quarantine is vital. Most vaccinations have to be given at day-old or very young and don't work in adult stock unless this primary course is given. Talk to your vet.

**How long do respiratory diseases live on surfaces and in the ground?**

Mycoplasma is carried on people and equipment so is easily spread. It hangs around drinkers long enough to infect naïve birds. The Aquamidas silver discs (FreshaTank) are great for keeping drinkers clean; remember to tell helpers so they don't throw the disc out! Most viruses thrive in damp areas as do parasites such as coccidia. The gape-



worm is easily transferred by coughing or excreting its eggs, so worm regularly (3-4 times a year depending on stocking density) with Flubenvet, the only licensed (proven) product for all poultry.

**After two weeks in quarantine and seemingly good health, is it still a risk to put an apparently 'healthy' bird in with your flock?**

If quarantined birds have been wormed, treated with DM and put on cider vinegar (dose 50ml:500ml) for the two weeks, there is not much more that can be done to ensure good health. Feed quality will make a huge difference and the question of what brand and quality that the birds have been on before you acquire them is a good enquiry.

**Can hybrids that have been vaccinated for many things, actually spread disease to non-vaccinated birds - through droppings or otherwise?**

The risk of disease transfer between vaccinated and unvaccinated poultry seems very low as long as there are no concurrent pathogens.

**There are many possible underlying causes of**

**ABOVE LEFT:** Tylan Soluble works well at the first sign of mycoplasma infection  
**ABOVE RIGHT:** Keep new arrivals in quarantine

**'mycoplasma-type symptoms'. So that people don't panic, what is classed as a mild dose of sneezing, compared to a deadly respiratory disease - presumably the activity of the bird will be an indicator?**

Of course a change in behaviour is generally the first sign that something is wrong; prey species try and hide any symptoms as long as they can. At a show, a change in the brand of shavings can give an allergic reaction to a hen and she may sneeze and have a little foam in her eyes. Her owner needs to be quizzed by the duty vet as to how healthy this hen was at home. Mycoplasma has a particular sweet smell and although very contagious does take a few days to show signs – thus quarantining after a show is a very good idea. Tylan Soluble works well at the first signs of mycoplasma infection, make sure that the required dose is dissolved by vigorous shaking in a small pot with water before adding to the required drinker amount, otherwise it sits on the bottom of the drinker and does not get in the bird.

See Victoria Roberts' website at <http://vicvet.com/>