

Look At Whole Picture Before Prescribing Treatment For Flock Health Problems

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If we lived in a perfect world, according to a renowned poultry veterinarian, to simply diagnose a disease would mean dialing the phone to call the nearest veterinarian. The vet would arrive, look at a computer printout, prescribe a drug, and that would be it.

"Unfortunately, in the poultry industry, we don't live in a perfect world," said Dr. Robert Owens, director of poultry health and veterinary services for Hubbard Farms, Walpole, N.H.

Owens spoke to about 30 poultry industry representatives on Monday at the Poultry Management and Health Seminar at Kreider Farms Restaurant.

To solve a poultry health problem, according to Owens, the birds' entire growout, including the past history of the flock, the current history, the environment, the feed, the housing, and the growth charts must be carefully analyzed before tests can be made to determine what the problem is. And the poultry veterinarian — not to mention the flock manager — has a wealth of tools available to make a diagnosis before any drugs or other treatment are needed.

"First and foremost, definitive diagnoses can only be made with the support of a fully equipped and staffed diagnostic laboratory," said Owens.

In New Hampshire, the labs have been closed. In fact, according to Owens, on the many talks he gives, he tries to garner support for states to implement a fully equipped and staffed poultry lab to support the industries. Fortunately, Pennsylvania has a laboratory.

But for poultry producers and those who manage the birds, according to Owens, to accurately prescribe treatment, they must first look at the whole picture.

"I think we have to take off the

blinders that some of us seem to have on, and we need to try and look at the whole picture when we're trying to diagnose a problem on the farm," he said.

The following tools are available to the producer to make a clear, accurate prescription of bird health problems on the farm:

- Past history. What has happened to the birds on the farm in the past? Examine previous disease challenges, including MG, ascites, SE, and other diseases. Was management of the previous flock up to par? What are the disease challenges in the area? (LT is no problem in New Hampshire, but is a factor in Pennsylvania.) What was the liveability of the previous flock? Pullet breeders (most of Owens work is done at the breeder level) should sit down with the manager and find out about the past flock to see what to focus in on.

- Current history. For hens, what is the size of the house? Type of house? Stocking density? Ventilation? Check to see if these factors are functioning correctly. What about the feed and water system? (Owens said that "water quality is being, in large part, ignored — a vital factor in flock health. "It really turns the flock around, just by improving the water quality," he said.) What has been the clean-out history? What about the room temperature — is it too hot or cold for birds? "It's important to put the whole picture together," said Owen. For broilers and pullets, what is the breeder performance record? (A standard form from Hubbard Farms keeps careful records of bird and management data.) A vital factor to look at is mortality, both 7- and 14-day. The Hubbard Farms mortality guide is 0.9 percent at 7 days and less than 1.6 percent at 14 days. What is the 20-week mortality? Weight and uniformity are other factors. What are the 4-week and 20-week

weights? "You can make or break a chicken with what you have at the 4-week weight," said the veterinarian. For Hubbard breeders, the 4-week weight is .9 pounds. For breeders, look at the age at housing. Weight at housing is another factor. What is the 20-week uniformity? What is the mortality at 25 weeks? This factor should be between 0.25 percent and 0.35 percent per week.

Owens said that clinical signs must be examined, such as evidence of diarrhea, passing feed, or snick.

"One thing I think we need to pay more attention to are these respiratory noises," he said. "When you go into a chicken house, if you just take your time and sit and be quiet, the chickens can tell you a lot of things."

For Owen, the rule of thumb is that the snick will develop 3-5 days after vaccination and should be over about 7-9 days after vaccination.

- Physical examination. "You cannot diagnose a problem with chickens down the farm unless you go into the chicken house," he said. "Let the chickens tell you what's wrong." Owen said producers should walk around the entire house, around the edges on a pullet house or up on the slats in a hen house, to see what is going on with the chickens. The sick birds will tend to flock on the sides of the houses. Also, pick the chickens up, and look at their fleshing, the size of the keel, frame size, and sexual uniformity. "Get out into the house and get around and look."

- Post-mortem exam. Owen said to do "a thorough exam. It has to be a hands-on thing — you have to do it and do it and do it until you get good at it." Producers should check the sick birds and healthy birds alike and compare them. Samples are essential, including those necessary for histopathology, cultures, bacterial sampling,



"It's important to put the whole picture together," said Dr. Robert Owen, director of poultry health and veterinary services at Hubbard Farms, Walpole, N.H., right. Owen describes some of the elements on the Hubbard Farms Pullet Performance Record to Dr. Paul Patterson, assistant professor, poultry science, Penn State.

and serology.

- Serology. Titer samples are only useful as an aid to diagnosis. This tool must be used to "put the whole picture together," he said. A vet must have both acute and convalescent titers. Generally, a vet should use the geometric mean titer (GMT) or the coefficient of variation (CV) to make an accurate serology. Also, vets need to be aware of sampling errors and to correlate serology to clinical signs.

"You can't take a snapshot of titer and believe you know what is going on. A lot of times the serology

doesn't correlate with what we're seeing in the field. Use all tools available to you.

"So much nowadays we look at a computer printout snapshot of things. And I think that's wrong. We have to look at the whole history of the flock to tell what's going on," he said.

Owens said these tools can be used in all types of poultry operations.

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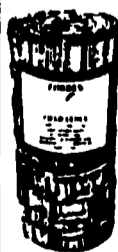


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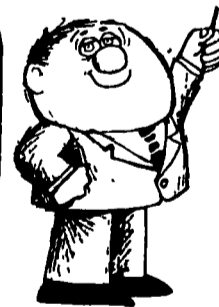


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