



## Matters of the Heart

February is a month for matters of the heart. Though not a light issue, I wanted to talk about heart disease.

I wrote this in January, shortly after a client's umbrella cockatoo died. He was about 14. He got his toe caught in the cage and broke his nail one day, did not bleed, but died that night. When the owner called me, I thought it was unlikely a broken nail caused the bird's death. So I asked her if I could do a necropsy (the animal equivalent of an autopsy).

This gets me back to the heart. Several studies of necropsy findings have documented that heart disease is more frequent in birds than once assumed. It is hard to diagnose heart problems in birds. X-Rays are the standard, where we are looking for an increased heart shadow. And more hospitals can do blood pressure and ECG's on birds now. And I find that listening with a small stethoscope (if the birds not screaming) allows me to hear some abnormalities. Ultrasound can also be used for diagnosis.

Heart disease may also affect the liver and lungs. With that said, the basics could still be important indicators; blood work and a physical exam. But sometimes there is no warning.

The umbrella had a ruptured aorta. I could also see plaques lining the large vessels, similar to atherosclerosis in humans. Though I did not have histopathology done (where tissue slides are examined by a pathologist), the most likely scenario is atherosclerosis with increased blood pressure, causing weakening of the aorta, and ultimate rupture.

But the take home message is prevention—something we all know, but may not think of in context of our birds:

- Weight control
- Increase exercise
- Reduce fats and cholesterol in the diet
- No exposure to cigarette smoke
- Reduce stress factors that cause the bird to be anxious  
(other animals, children—it varies by bird, and what they are used to)
- Periodic vet exams
- Blood work

Hearts are a symbol of love, so for Valentines Day, instead of pizza crust and cheese, give your bird a little extra TLC or a toy that will encourage activity.

XOXO

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