Household Poultry : Symptoms, Prevention, and Cure of Diseases, Parasites, and Vices

THOUGH the impression that poultry diseases are widespread is common, it is questionable whether, under proper conditions, poultry suffer any more ailments than other livestock. Certainly there is a greater tendency for sick hens to be neglected and for a hopeful attitude that the birds might recover of their own accord to be adopted, but that is the result not so much of wilful cruelty as of a general lack of knowledge. Many simple ailments may be treated profitably. This month's article for the household poultry keeper by W. L. McIver, Poultry Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Hamilton, advises on the symptoms for which to look and emphasises that "prevention is better than cure."

THE incidence of poultry diseases now shows a very encouraging improvement on that of the early part of this century. Even until little more than 10 years ago pullorum disease took its toll unchecked in New Zealand. Now the majority of hatcheries blood test for this disease and kill all the carrier hens, breaking one of the links in the chain of infection. Instead of being the most dreaded complaint among chicks, it now kills very few. The disease is still carried on because of insufficient testing and, ironically enough, because of improved brooder rearing methods, which increase the chances of affected chicks surviving. Such chickens remain carriers and can pass the disease on to their progeny. Unfortunately, most poultry keepers running hens for egg production and not for breeding have the impression that blood testing and tested stock are the concern only of the hatchery owner, but, as affected hens do not lay their full potential of eggs, it is just as important to all hen owners that the disease be wiped out. The pullorum germ affects the ovary and a proportion (averaging about a fifth) of the yolk sacs fail to mature. The hens can show all the visible signs of intensive laying and yet be poor layers or even non-producers. Household poultry keepers should ensure that they buy birds not only from a farm that has blood testing done, but also from a stock with a very low proportion of reactors.

Coccidiosis made heavy inroads in many flocks. The idea that a strict plan of cleanliness and sanitation which involved the removal of litter from brooder houses every few days could aid in its control would not have been accepted without the supporting evidence which research had brought to light.

Thousands of birds were lost annually from "going light" before it was established that this malady was frequently identical with tuberculosis and that infected fowls could be identified by the tuberculin test.

Fowl pox also took its toll. Flock owners accepted with what grace they could the foregone conclusion that they would have fowl pox to contend with each year. Now advantage can be taken of vaccination methods with reasonable assurance that losses from pox will be almost nil.

When the nutritional disturbances to which fowls are susceptible, especially the vitamin deficiencies, were almost unknown, the losses they caused helped to increase the total mortality from unexplained causes. Now everybody has some understanding of dietetics, and poultry feeding is a matter of applying that knowledge with common sense.

This article is not intended to cover all poultry diseases fully, but even the household poultry keeper must have a little knowledge of the subject or he cannot be expected to recognise symptoms.

Pullorum Disease

Pullorum disease can be passed from the hen to her progeny through her eggs at hatching time. The organism causing the disease is located in the hen's ovary and passes with the yolk into hen eggs. Thus, if an infected egg hatches, the chick carries the disease. This complaint used to be called B.W.D (bacillary white diarrhoea) after its major symptom, but it cannot be recognised by outward signs in older pullets or in hens. At that stage of life the disease does not affect body condition or weight, and to the eye the hen looks healthy. It affects chicks, usually under 10 days of age but sometimes up to about 3 weeks.

Affected chickens assume a huddled, sick appearance, with drooping wings, but, as these symptoms apply to nearly all poultry ailments, something more definite must be looked for in diagnosing this complaint. Certain signs are an undue quantity of white droppings and the pasting up of the vent by white droppings.

Coccidiosis

Of the two forms of coccidiosis one affects young chicks and the other maturing birds.

The caecal type shows up mainly between 3 and 6 weeks of age. The distinguishing symptom is an undue amount of red droppings. Dead chicks should be examined for congealed blood in the caeca or blind guts. As the droppings are the most important distributing factor, frequent and thorough cleaning of the brooder pen is the best preventive.

The intestinal type affects mainly birds between 3 and 6 months of age. It does not cause high mortality, but frequently occasions a severe setback in growth and rate of maturity. In a mild form it may make the pullets appear only backward for their age rather than ailing, so it is finally the failure to begin laying at the normal age that makes the average owner realise that there is something wrong with the birds.

This disease should not swell total mortality to any extent now as sulphamezathine has proved an excellent cure of the caecal form, though it is not so effective in the intestinal form.

For more complete information than is given in this article the following free bulletins on poultry diseases are available from major offices of the Department of Agriculture:—

Bulletin 264—"Infectious Fowl Paralysis."

Bulletin 318—"Pullorum Disease."

Bulletin 319—"Coccidiosis."

Bulletin 327—"Internal and External Parasites of Poultry."

For diagnosis of poultry ailments, typical ailing birds—preferably two or three live ones—should be sent to the Chief Diagnostic Officer, Animal Research Station, Wallaceville, with a covering letter stating concisely the symptoms recognised and giving a short history of the trouble suspected. No charge will be made for the post-mortem report.

Tuberculosis

Though tuberculosis probably is the first disease of which most poultry keepers think when making a diagnosis of sick birds, especially if the fowls are emaciated on the breast and keel, it is now far from common in New Zealand and affects very few commercial flocks. There are many causes other than tuberculosis for birds "going light" or wasting.

Again droppings are the greatest source of infection. Control depends on strict sanitary methods and killing of suspected cases.

Fowl Pox

Fowl pox is unknown in the colder areas of New Zealand and occurs so seldom on some commercial farms that the owners do not recognise an outbreak, though other farms experience cases of it year after year. Once the disease breaks out it will run its course.

It is recognisable by the sores it causes on comb, wattles, and face, but as this trouble and roup require special treatment too long to detail here, anyone needing help about them should seek the advice of the nearest Poultry Instructor.

Intestinal Worms

Poultry are very subject to internal parasites. Roundworms are by far the most prevalent, but tapeworm infesta-