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Perugia, 15-17 Giugno 2015

Università degli Studi di Perugia

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FEATHER PICKING IN COMPANION PARROTS: SENSIBLE SPECIES, RISK FACTORS AND ETHOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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Feather Picking (FP) is a behavioral disorder that is frequently observed in captive parrots. FP includes plucking, chewing, fraying and/or biting, resulting in loss of or damage to the feather (van Zeeland et al., 2013). The prevalence FP reported by McDonald Kinkaid et al. (2013) in a sample of 538 parrots was 15.8%. Despite several studies, the mechanisms of this pathological condition still remain to be unequivocally elucidated.

The goals of this study were to estimate the prevalence in Italian pet parrots and evaluate the risk factors and possible ethological correlation.

A web survey was created through the Google Drive application. It was addressed to owners of all species of companion parrots and was distributed through on line parrots association websites, social networks and by mail. The survey was available for compilation from June to October 2014. The 31 questions were divided in two sections: one addressed to all parrots' owners; the second limited to owners of FP parrots. The diagnosis of FP was confirmed by a veterinarian who excluded other possible pathological conditions.

A total of 335 survey was obtained, of which 292 (82.9%) were useful for the statistical analysis. Forty-one different species of parrots were indicated. The most popular species kept as pets were *Psittacus* spp. (24.3%), *Agapornis* spp. (19.5%), *Nymphicus hollandicus* (17.8%) and *Amazona* spp. (8.9%). Our study showed a FP prevalence rate of 17.6%. The highest prevalence were reported in *Psittacus* spp. (31.4%) and *Agapornis* spp. (25%). Although several authors refer *Psittacus* spp. and *Cacatua* spp. as the main species affected by FP (Chitty, 2003), in our sample *Cacatua* spp. was under-represented (1.7% of the whole population). Our data show that also *Agapornis* spp. is affected by FP; in the last years, in Italy, this genus was increasingly adopted as pet. The percentage of FP in parrots that live with other parrots was significantly higher (62.7%) than in animals living alone (37.2%; $p < 0.05$). Among hand-reared parrots (88.2% of our sample) 52.1% were fed in neonatal age by the breeder and weaned by the final owner; 47.8% was fed in neonatal age and weaned by the farmer and sold when weaning was completed. FP prevalence was significantly higher in parrots fed in neonatal age and weaned by the breeder and sold when weaning was completed (81.8%), than those fed in neonatal age by the breeder and weaned by the final owner (18.2%) ($p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that different hand-rearing techniques could influence the prevalence of FP. Fifty percent of parrots affected by FP showed behavioral stereotypes (i.e. altered sexual behavior, aggressiveness against humans, etc.). As suggested by several authors, FP may be considered a multi-factorial behavioral pathology in which factors of different origin (i.e. hand-rearing techniques, sexual frustration) may cause behavioral disorders associated to self-injuries.

McDonald Kinkaid HY et al (2013), *Avian Biol Res*, 6(4):289-296

Van Zeeland YRA et al (2013), *Vet j*, 196:247-252

Chitty J (2003), *In Pract*, 25:484-493