

## **Update 7th July 2017**

### **Vaccine Trial Blood test.**

On Monday this week I again collected blood from the vaccine trial birds. This was forwarded to Dr Travis Beddoe at Latrobe University. He advises that the results measuring the amount of immunity will be available by the end of next week. We now expect protective levels of immunity to be present. Once this is determined we will progress to the next stage of vaccine development which is adaption of the techniques used so far to take the vaccine into commercial production. During the week after the results are available, a meeting between myself, Travis Beddoe, Dr Caroline Bathje ( commercialisation Officer at Latrobe University ), Mark White ( via Skype ) , Charles Hider ( the Board solicitor ) and Dr Mike Stear will be held to plan and discuss this.

### **Brisbane variant Blood test.**

On Monday I also drew blood from 4 birds from the original Victorian loft that was exposed to the Brisbane Rota virus. We are also measuring the amount of immunity in these birds. We need to ensure that exposure to the Brisbane variant confers good immunity to all strains of Rota including the more severe disease causing ones. These results will also be available by the end of next week.

### **Results of expanded Brisbane virus trial.**

The controlled limited release of the Brisbane virus into 11 lofts has been completed. Of the 4000 birds in these lofts 3 deaths have been reported to us. One of these was in SA. This bird was taken to a SA avian vet, Dr Anne Fowler, for autopsy. The bird was found to have a respiratory infection unrelated to Rota however we have still arranged for full histopathology to be done on this bird. These results will be available next week. The 2 other deaths were reported in a single loft. Histopathology is also being done on these birds.

### **Dropping available from Brisbane Rota trial**

Well known and successful fancier Andrew Spiliopoulos was one of the 11 lofts in the extended trial. Dropping from his loft are being made available to interested fanciers. The droppings have been extensively tested. Microscopic examination of a wet mount was done at the Melbourne Bird Veterinary Clinic. Samples were sent to AgriBio for viral testing and further samples were also sent to a specialist lab for Circo virus testing. No significant problems were identified. The testing confirmed that the droppings were strongly positive for Rota virus. Although there was no charge for the work at the Melbourne Bird Veterinary Clinic there was a fee from each of the other 2 labs. Andrew covered this cost himself. Dropping are being distributed by Stephen Kearsy and Andrew. Stephen reports that he has distributed "Poovac Sachets" to over 500 fanciers while Andrew says he has distributed 490 sachets. It seems that there is a national effort by fanciers to take advantage of this offer and protect their birds with these disease free droppings against the nastier forms of the disease. I would appreciate any feedback that fanciers may have on the use of the "Poovacs". With 980 distributed we have the potential to develop a huge database of information that can be used to help our understanding of the disease and in turn benefit us all. Please do however email any feed back in. These days my phone is being seriously overworked.

It is starting to appear that in healthy well managed lofts that it can take up to 14 days for this mild strain to actually make the birds sick. This strain seems to have a longer incubation time and then cause mild symptoms compared with the shorter incubation period and then severe disease and deaths of the more severe strains. If fanciers are concerned that

the symptoms are so mild that their bird may not have become immune then for reassurance a Rota PCR test can be done about 3-4 weeks after introduction of the Brisbane droppings. To date we have had one non trial loft report deaths after the introduction of the Brisbane variant via a "Poovac". This loft is in NSW and has had 3 birds of about 300 die. Histopathology is being done on these birds to try and identify what the trigger factors in this loft were that caused these deaths. Results will be available next week

#### **Investigation of reinfection with Rota in SA**

Samples have also been forwarded from a SA loft that seems to have reoccurrence of the disease after only 5 months. Histopathology is being done. These results will be available next week

#### **AgriBio Ongoing research.**

AgriBio is proposing ongoing research into the vaccine and Rota generally. The research will allow improvement in the vaccine and make it cheaper for production. The overall aim is to generate a platform for production of vaccine antigens for future mutations of the rotavirus. As it appears that this virus changes easily this will mean that if necessary the vaccine can be more easily modified if the need arises in the future to ensure the vaccines ongoing effectiveness

#### **The Southern Fed in NSW**

Ted Dubois, secretary of the Southern Federation in NSW reports that between 10 and 20 of the approximately 130 members who have competed in 1 or more of their races have caught Rota in the race baskets. Ted's own birds caught the disease and he had 1 die. He estimates that about 90 members had had the disease in their lofts prior to racing. None of these members have caught the disease a second time. He advises that all competitors were warned of the risk of catching the disease prior to the commencement of racing. Ted reports that the Southern Fed has been having quite good racing with reports of dead birds in race baskets and birds reluctant to leave the race point a total fantasy.

#### **Vaccine fake news.**

I have had several fanciers in the SCF call me this week telling me that they have been told that the vaccine "has failed". Interesting seeing that there is no indication of this and the results will not actually be back until next week. We had a similar rumour being presented as fact several months ago through the Greater Melbourne Fed in Melbourne. This rumour started even before the vaccine trial had started. It seems that for some people if the facts don't match their agenda that they are quite happy to manufacture their own.

#### **More fake news**

I have read on the internet that I have "bowed to pressure" by federations and are now recommending racing. This is not the situation at all. Our team in Melbourne have simply been presenting the results of testing to federations which make their own decisions. The investigation of the Brisbane variant revealed a strain that caused mild disease and virtually no mortality. All things considered and in the face of nastier strains spreading both naturally and intentionally it offered an acceptable way of offering protection to birds and therefore allowed birds from different lofts to mix. A side effect of this was that racing could safely occur for at least several months after exposure. Initial discussions between myself and fed officials, about this, occurred over 2 months ago.

#### **Arguments for and against racing**

I have spoken to many fanciers now about the decision by some fanciers to deliberately infect their birds with Rota virus quite early in the piece when it was causing high mortality in some lofts.

From what I can gather the main arguments put up by each side are below.

Thoughts of those who did not want to infect their birds:-

1/ Fanciers who did want to infect their birds showed a selfish disregard both to their birds and to other fanciers. They just wanted to race and did not care if their birds gave the virus to other fanciers.

2/ These fanciers' attitude has exposed a "redneck" element within the pigeon community. Against the advice of the DPI, the National Board, the offices of both the state and federal Chief Veterinary Officers and the RSPCA they showed a dogged persistence in wanting to race and were prepared to do so at any cost.

3/ This willingness to cause disease and death in birds under our care tarnished the reputation of pigeon racing.

4/ Why should my birds be placed at risk because of other people's actions?

While the thoughts of those who did infect their birds are:-

1/ Fanciers who did not infect did not see the bigger picture. For pigeon racing to persist racing needs to occur. This is necessary to maintain membership and also to keep clubs and federations financial.

2/ The vaccine will never be available or take years to be ready. There is no other way of immunising the birds.

3/ If fanciers want to race, their birds will need to be immune and so they need to be exposed to the virus. They will catch it sooner or later anyway. Once they have had it they can't catch it again. This has been explained to them so why didn't they get on and infect their birds.

4/ Vets can supply drugs that will minimise losses.

Right from the start I have been asked by fanciers many many times whether racing should occur or not. I have explained that I am not an elected federation official and as a vet can simply present the facts as they become known to us. The final decision in the end has always been up to the individual fancier.

### **The Future.**

Even though some of these early arguments have since been found to be wrong any logical person can probably see both sides of the argument. It is time however to put these differences aside and focus on what is best for the sport and that is presenting a combined front. What has become apparent is that it is essential to develop a way to protect the Australian flock. It has also become apparent that there is a good chance that the whole of Australia will experience in the future, something similar to what the West Australians are experiencing now. Although the Brisbane variant has presented a temporary "life line" a vaccine is the only long term effective way of protecting pigeons. Anything that helps with the development of the vaccine has surely therefore got to be a good thing.

So for now, we have lots of blood and tissue samples away at the various labs for testing. As these results become available I will report them on this Rota Update. The next week should be very interesting.