BEAK AND FEATHER SYNDROME
ALSO KNOWN AS PBFD

This disease is caused by a circovirus. It has a wide species range, particularly in parrots, and is a deadly avian disease that in the case of carrier birds may not show any symptoms.

PBFD attacks tissue in young birds including the skin, feathers, beak, oesophagus and the crop. Organs of the immune system, such as cloacal bursa, thymus and bone marrow, if attacked may result in depression of the immune system which then leaves the bird exposed to secondary infections. Infections of the feathers and beak will produce growth deformities, hence the common name of Beak and Feather Syndrome.

PBFD can affect birds of any age, but is more commonly seen in the young. However, older birds may suddenly test positive for the virus as PBFD is extremely contagious.

Obvious symptoms are feather problems such as bald patches on the head, missing primary wing feathers and/or tail feathers.

Beak deformity, especially of the upper beak, is another common symptom. The beak is often overgrown, usually splits or breaks, and may develop a foul discharge on the inner surface.

Feather damage is also common. They may be half developed and ragged; or there may be almost full feather loss and the birds then die of a secondary infection.

The virus can survive for many months, or even years, in feather dust, faeces, or nesting material. Infection is easily spread by the inhalation of infected feather dust or dried faeces. It can be carried on clothes, food and cages, and consequently be transferred to other birds and aviaries. It is very resistant to many most chemicals.

PBFD is extremely contagious and there is currently no commercially available cure. A vaccine developed by an Australian university proved successful, but a lack of funds to progress to commercial availability saw the project mothballed.

As mentioned above, some birds carrying this disease may not show any symptoms but can pass it to their young, or other birds in close contact. Yet other birds will show no sign of PBFD until stress brings it out, but they may infect other birds before they become symptomatic.

Wild Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Long-billed Corellas are heavily infected with PBFD, and many wild caught young offered as pets die within a few months.