



Dr Margit Muller advises falconers to constantly check their birds' skin, especially at the end of the hunting season, when the superbug usually occurs. — KT photo by Kiran Prasad

Abu Dhabi vet discovers new disease in falcons

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ABU DHABI — A new disease has been discovered in falcons by Dr Margit Muller, veterinary doctor and director of the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital (ADFH).

Dr Muller has been working to discover and prove the new infection since 2007 and on Monday, her research was finally published in the prestigious Sage-Hindawi Veterinary Medicine International.

"We realised what it was last year, but could not announce it as we had to prove it," Dr Muller told *Khalej Times*.

"Acinetobacter baumannii", the official Latin name of the disease, or the superbug as Dr Muller calls it, was initially found in humans and it is a relatively new infection.

"It is the same infection identified during 2002-2004 in soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan regions," she explained.

Finding a human disease mutating to a bird was breaking news, sustaining Dr Muller's theory that human and animal

medicine should no longer be separated. Not only that, but she also proved that the superbug was not caught by falcons in hospitals, but in the wild.

"When we started receiving these cases, they were falcons returning from hunting trips. When hunting, a falcon is not chasing the top-flying duck from a flock, for example, but the last one, which is also the weakest and more prone to carry a disease," pointed out Dr Muller.

The first falcon infected with the superbug arrived at ADFH in 2007. The veterinary team could establish that the bird was suffering from tuberculosis, but it could not explain the large lesions it had. Then a second falcon came in with the same problem, then a third and the numbers kept growing.

They all had tuberculosis, all showed same blood parameters and all had these unexplained lesions, some larger than five centimetres, which for a falcon is huge, growing either on the sides of the bird or on its inner thighs.

"At first we thought it's tuberculosis,

but then when more and more birds came with these lesions as well, we thought it's strange," said Dr Muller.

She ran all kinds of tests, but no disease found in the avian or animal lineage could be found and that is when she started looking at human diseases and in 2009 she realised that it was "Acinetobacter baumannii", which in conjunction with tuberculosis, creates a superbug. "There is no particular medicine for this disease, but if it is detected early, we can treat it with both tuberculosis medicine and antibiotics. It takes a very long time for the bird to recover but we recently had a happy case and after 68 days in hospital, the falcon is now very strong, put the weight back on and it's perfectly healthy," said Dr Muller.

If the lesions are too large, which means the infection is well developed, it is too late for the falcon to be saved, so Dr Muller advises falconers to constantly check their birds' skin, especially at the end of the hunting season, when the superbug usually occurs.

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