Effect of Pigeon Keeping on Health and Family Life

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Introduction

Pigeon keeping/breeding is prevalent worldwide and a lot has been written about this hobby/profession and pigeon fanciers in the popular media, websites and books. It is well known that pigeons transmit diseases and cause pulmonary disorders in pigeon keepers/breeders, but, not much is available in the scientific/medical literature regarding the impact of this ‘addiction’ on the psychological and mental health of the individuals and family life/relations. The following narrative is based mainly on personal experience (NJI), observation (ZHI), websites and common sense.

Pigeon (Columba livia domestica - domesticated from wild rock dove) keeping/breeding, practiced for thousands of years in almost every part of the world, has evolved into a hobby or a commercial enterprise for the purpose of aesthetic satisfaction, recreation, entertainment and food [1]. The hobby of breeding or keeping pigeons by pigeon fanciers, for racing (sport), flying, homing and show, is a popular occupation throughout the world. Belgium claims to be the capital of pigeon fanciers, with the world’s most valuable racing pigeon: in 2013 Belgian’s ‘Bolt’ sold for $410,000 [2] and in 2017 it was Belgian’s ‘Golden Prince’ sold for $465,000 [3,4]. The business of breeding pigeons for food (meat and eggs) has also flourished (Figures 1 and 2).

Pigeon fanciers have distinguished company [5-7], including the royalty, Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, King Leopold II, British Kings Edward VII, George V and George VI, Queens Victoria and Elizabeth II, King of Belgium, Sultan of Johore, Prince Bernard, German Chancellor Willi Brandt, French President Mitterrand, fashion designer Maurizio Gucci, entrepreneur Walt Disney, inventor Nikola Tesla, artists Pablo Picasso and Claude Monet, scientist/naturalist Charles Darwin and Gerald Durrell, French revolutionary Maximillian Robespierre, boxing champions George Foreman and Mike Tyson, actors Yul Brynner, Roy Rogers, Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, Michael Landon, Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood, Rock and Roll singer Elvis Presley, jazz musician Johnny Otis, American football quarterback Terry Bradshaw and baseball player Willie Mays, Irish International footballer Paddy Ambrose, Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, etc.

There are at least 800 breeds of domesticated pigeons categorized as (historical) messenger pigeons, homing pigeons, flying/sporting pigeons, racing pigeons, fancy pigeons and utility pigeons [8].

Pigeon fanciers organize exhibitions and bird shows exhibiting thousands of pigeons worldwide (for example in England, Australia, United States, Germany, Belgium, etc.), which are sponsored by hundreds of local, state and national pigeon clubs and attended by thousands of people. Many avid pigeon fanciers usually have a large number of pigeons and they often keep adding more and more to their flock.

Pigeon fanciers love their pigeons. They appreciate their beauty, grace and soothing sounds. They get euphoria, intense pleasure and pleasant excitement from seeing their pigeons perform (racing,
Children and others) are neglected or diminished (NJ - personal dependence, binge eating, compulsive buying, compulsive sexual feather dust and mites [18,19]. The infections which have been found to be transmitted from pigeon keepers/breeders/fanciers at risk to develop the above diseases, but also member of their families who reside with them [24] and are exposed to bird droppings or feather dust.

Bird keepers/fanciers can decrease the risk of developing diseases associated with the birds by using gloves, aprons, masks, respirator while inside the lofts (birds' housing) and by increasing loft ventilation and more often cleaning of the loft.

Avid pigeon fanciers who take part in pigeon racing and flying can damage their eyes from watching their birds in flight for a long time in the bright sun. According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology [47] and American Optometric Association [48], too much exposure to UV light from the sun raises the risks of eye diseases, such as cataract, corneal sunburn and benign growth (pterygium) [49-51]. Furthermore, staying for a long time in the sun, especially in the summer, can result in dehydration, heat-stroke, photo-allergic dermatitis [52], sunburn and solar urticaria [53], facial wrinkling [54], actinic keratosis [55], allergic hypersensitivity skin reactions [55] and cancer of the skin (cutaneous malignant melanoma [56-58], squamous cell carcinoma [55] and basal cell carcinoma [59]), more likely in fair-skinned individuals.

To protect from the damaging effect of long-term exposure to sun, one could use, appropriate sunglasses, ultraviolet radiation-blocking contact lenses (if needed), sunscreen (sunblock), wearing light colored long-sleeved shirts and avoiding exposure to sun at dangerous hours (10.00-16.00). A wide-brimmed hat may be useful, but pigeon fanciers may not like to wear one, because it may scare the birds. Dehydration and heat-stroke may be prevented by ample hydration and taking breaks from staying too long in the sun.

Pigeon fanciers/keepers, who devote a lot of time in taking care of their birds, can develop back and muscle problems from sitting or standing too long, especially in the hot sun or in the cold weather. The risk of back and muscle problems may be decreased by taking short breaks and exercise.

Worldwide, pigeon racing has gained popularity and with it the associated betting and gambling [60] and increased death of the birds while racing (it is estimated that 75% to 90% of birds fail to return after racing); in many cases, underperforming pigeons are culled [61,62]. Although, pigeon racing and betting has been banned in many cities of the United States and other countries, these practices continue [63]. Another crime associated with highly prized competition pigeons is bird-napping and smuggling [64].

It is hoped that this brief article will result in the realization of potential for adverse effects of pigeon keeping/breeding on health and family life, adoption of preventive measures and stimulating a dialog.

References


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