

## ***Versternema struthionis* in ostriches: is there an association with peritonitis?**

*Versternema struthionis* is an internal parasite of ostriches. This helminth was described for the 1st time in 1976<sup>3</sup> and was later found in wild ostriches in Botswana<sup>1</sup>.

It is an archaic filariid with no distinctive characteristics.

These filariids are free-living in the abdominal cavity, usually in the region of

the ovary or testes<sup>2</sup>. I have also observed them among the intestines.

During 1996 I found the first specimens in 2 approximately 14-month-old

ostriches presented for routine slaughter. The worms were associated with light peritonitis. Dr W P Burger of KKK Laboratory identified them as *V. struthionis*.

Some months later a breeding ostrich was presented for salvage slaughter after having died on the farm. The conclusion I reached from necropsy was that the ostrich had died as result of severe peritonitis, and once again *V. struthionis* was present in large numbers among the intestines. There was no indication of penetration of the gastrointestinal tract by a foreign object, and no foreign objects were present in the intestines. The owner, upon closer questioning, said that he did not deworm his breeding ostriches. He was advised to do so, as *V. struthionis* appears to be highly sensitive to regular anthelmintic treatment.

One filariid sent to Dr F Malan, Hoechst

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Experimental Farm, Malelane, was submitted to Prof. J Boomker, Medical University of Southern Africa, who confirmed the identification as *V. struthionis*.

During this period, peritonitis associated with these worms was again found in a routinely slaughtered ostrich. No foreign objects were present in the gastrointestinal tract or abdominal cavity. I have subsequently occasionally found these helminths in routinely slaughtered ostriches, sometimes but not always associated with peritonitis.

What interests me is the association of the helminths with peritonitis. Apparently this has never been described before. Could these helminths, when present in large numbers, irritate the body so much that peritonitis results?

I would like to know whether anyone else has found *V. struthionis* in ostriches,

and in particular whether they have observed them in association with peritonitis of uncertain origin.

I am grateful to Drs W P Burger and F Malan and Prof. J Boomker for identifying the parasite.

## REFERENCES

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3. Noda R, Nagata S 1976 *Struthiofilaria megaloccephala* gen. et sp. n. (Nematoda: Filarioidea) from the body cavity of an ostrich. *Bulletin of the University of Osaka Prefecture* (B): 28: 1–4