

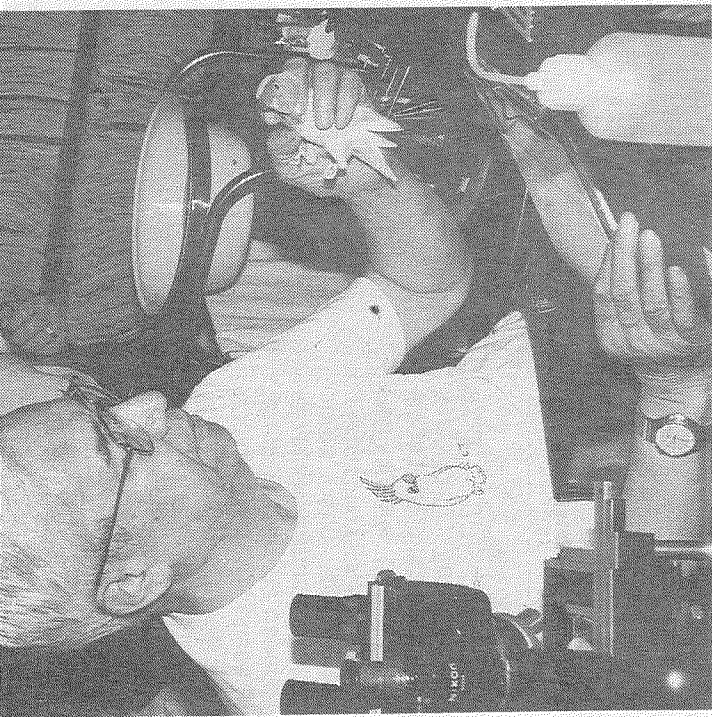
This is the Bird Hospital, operated since 1962 by Dr. Tatsushiro Takahashi and his wife Chise. A pioneer of avian medicine and care in Japan, Takahashi is known throughout the country as *the* bird specialist.

On an average afternoon, 50 to 100 people, some coming from as far away as Kyushu and Aomori, will seek his expertise for a wide variety of birds ranging from the usual pet parakeets, canaries and finches to the more exotic falcons and flamingos as well as an assortment of orphaned and injured wild birds.

The Bird Hospital's consulting room is dominated by a huge wooden table, separating more waiting people from the doctor-wife team, surrounded by instruments and thousands of patient files. Each person approaches the table in turn and slides a cage over to the veterinarian who gently removes the occupant. Struggling birds grow still as he talks reassuringly to them with frequent chirps and coos.

With the steady, practiced hands of a surgeon, he examines the tiny bodies, turning them, spreading wings, palpating stomachs. Included among his instruments are a jeweler's magnifying glass to examine, for example, the delicate claws of a finch, a microscope to study droppings, stomach fluid or blood samples, and a small Bunsen burner to warm food and medicines.

Behind the doctor, wife Chise is kept on her feet, busy answering the telephone, locating charts, preparing and dispensing medicines, food



A HEART FOR THE FEATHERED — Bird specialist Dr. Tatsushiro Takahashi holds a patient at his clinic as wife Chise stands ready to assist behind. The couple's original T-shirts were designed by the doctor and embroidered by his wife.

PHOTO BY BARBARA BAYER

and supplements, and taking care of payments.

The doctor never moves from the table, and it is only upon closer inspection that one realizes his chair is a wheelchair.

A tragic turn

In 1947, at the age of 22, Takahashi, who had just the previous year acquired his veterinarian license, accidentally cut his finger while performing an autopsy on a dog suspected of rabies. As a precaution, Takahashi was rushed to the hospital to undergo a series of rabies vaccinations.

Apparently as a side effect of the poor-quality, postwar vaccine, the young vet lost the use of both legs and was confined to bed for three painful years. A particularly tragic endnote to the episode: The dog tested negative for rabies.

"During the time I was bedridden," Takahashi, now 69, remembers, "someone gave me a canary to cheer me up. It always sang and was so charming. It was a great comfort. Having been very active and then suddenly losing it all, I felt I understood how a caged bird must feel."

his own findings. In the neighborhood his reputation grew as a bird healer, until in 1962 he decided to make it official and hung out his sign.

Fresh start

A novelty at the time, the bird specialist immediately attracted the attention of the media, and business steadily increased.

Even today, although avian medicine is finally being taught in school, bird specialists are extremely rare. "Financially, it's hard to survive only caring for birds," Takahashi points out.

Also, acquiring an ease with the delicate creatures is difficult. "Most vets," he says, "rarely get birds and when they do they're often afraid to touch them for fear of breaking a leg or wing."

"So they just look at them from a distance and try to diagnose them. If the bird has diarrhea, they say, 'Aha, it must be an intestinal inflammation.' If the bird is wheezing they say, 'pneumonia.' There's many other possibilities, but only closer examination will reveal them."

Advice to bird lovers

Many of the ailments the bird doctor sees are preventable ones, resulting from poor diet or misinformed care. Calcium deficiencies often lead to impacted eggs. Intestinal inflammations and weight loss due to an inability to absorb nutrients are frequently brought on by salty foods, cookies and pickled vegetables people "pamper" their birds with. "Give a bird

comes in various forms getting a taste for certain foods that are later withheld and, similarly, not being let out of the cage as an adult after having enjoyed freedom as a baby.

Seeds with the hulls removed, though they make for cleaner apartments, are another source of stress for birds. "Hulled seeds were made only with people in mind," Takahashi points out. In addition to the lack of stimulus proffered by cracking seed, for which a bird's bill is designed, "The seeds dry out, lose their flavor and birds don't want to eat them."

Always genuinely concerned for a bird's welfare, both physical and mental, Takahashi has one other pet peeve — clipping wings. "To a bird, it's like cutting your legs off. But people clip a bird's wings like they were cutting hair. It's *not* the same thing," he says, furrowing his brow.

"They tell me the bird will fly away if they don't clip his wings. I tell them, 'Birds aren't trying to escape. They just want to have more room. Put screens on the windows. Be more careful.'"

"If people ask me to clip their birds' wings, I won't do it," he says with characteristic directness, adding quietly, "Because of my legs, it especially bothers me."

Kotori no Byoin is open afternoons for consultation. (03) 3721-6470.

A children's book (elementary-school level) about Dr. Takahashi and his bird hospital was published last October. Written by Junya Yokota, "Kotori no Byoin" (The Bird Doctor is Now In!) is available from Kumon Shuppan for ¥1,200 per copy. (03) 3234-4001.