Wildlife health experts aid national database

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the WA Carnaby's Cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus latirostris) population is adversely affected by a relatively poorly understood hindlimb paralysis syndrome. Credit: BiteYourBum.Com Photography

Throughout history, native wildlife has been responsible for transmitting infectious diseases to humans and domestic animals, with some of these diseases potentially posing a threat to public health and biosecurity.

Western Australian researchers may be among the first to know about

such outbreaks, after Murdoch University joined six additional Australian universities monitoring the incidence and spread of wildlife diseases, including "zoonotic" cases that can spread from animals to humans.

Researchers will contribute data to Wildlife Health Australia's electronic Wildlife Health Information System (eWHIS), a national database that monitors wildlife disease.

The program will monitor the location, frequency and impacts of both suspected and confirmed wildlife diseases, Murdoch's Dr Nahiid Stephens says.

"Most of our data will be drawn from wildlife cases that present to Murdoch's Veterinary Hospital and Pathology service, with other relevant cases coming from various Murdoch researchers that investigate specific wildlife diseases," she says.

"For example, the presence of disease in bat species in northern Western Australia is something Murdoch researchers are investigating, especially Lyssa virus which can spread from bats to humans and is related to rabies.

"It is important we provide findings to this national database. Diseases which we don't yet have in Australia are also important to keep watch for.

"We will also focus on causes of mortality and disease that could affect Australia's biodiversity, or that occur in species that are listed as endangered or vulnerable.

"For example, the WA Carnaby's Cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus latirostris) population is adversely affected by a relatively poorly understood

hindlimb paralysis syndrome."

Until now, data has been contributed to eWHIS by government agencies and departments along with zoo and wildlife hospitals, private veterinarians and national biosecurity programs.

The addition of seven universities nationwide is a one-year pilot program partly funded by the Federal Government.

Murdoch with use the funding to provide a targeted pathology service to a limited number of cases at Kanyana Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre and Native ARC.

Having the data available may provide early warning of any outbreak that could involve multiple areas nationally, Dr Stephens says.

"It is essential for this information to be shared and to build a nationwide picture of who is doing what in terms of research and diagnostic work and what are they finding," she says.

The universities are expected to bring in a wider dataset in terms of different wildlife species, and the geographic areas where they are found, with collected data expected to increase by around 50 per cent.

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