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Fomites

Fomites are inanimate objects that can carry disease causing micro-organisms (pathogens) between birds, flocks (houses) and farms. Obviously, the probability of a fomite being successful increases the closer it gets to the birds and the number of pathogens (dose) that the fomite carries.

The simplest way to contaminate a fomite is with droppings or respiratory/oral discharges from infected birds. But there are more unusual ways, for example *Pasteurella multocida* (the cause of fowl cholera) has been transferred between farms in poultry blood on the needle of a vaccinating gun that was taken to another farm and used again without changing the needle (a mechanical mosquito).

In another situation, turkey semen contaminated with *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* was collected from infected toms and taken to a second farm which broke with mycoplasmosis in its hens after they were artificially inseminated. In this instance the semen was acting as a fomite. Interestingly, one use throw away AI straws were introduced to stop the rapid transfer of venereal diseases from hen to hen (here the straw was the fomite).

Management

The first stage in managing fomites is to identify the ones going into your flock. Some will be obvious, such as wellington boots, brushes and forks, while others will be less obvious, such as mobile phones and workers' tool bags.

The best way to remove the risk is to remove the fomite. In the case of wellington boots more and more farms are keeping dedicated wellington boots in each house (you should certainly never permit a visitor to bring his own boots on to your farm). Accumulated debris between the treads on the sole can contain viable disease micro-organisms for days and weeks, or even months in the case of coccidial oocysts or worm eggs.

Fomites that you might overlook are feed, water and dust particles. In the case of the latter, the dust coming out of a poultry house, which obviously includes feather dander, could easily have thousands of minute fomites carrying, for example, Marek's disease virus.

If you can not remove a fomite, which is obviously the best and safest thing to do, you must consider reducing the load of pathogens being carried. For example, if you have to take a partition from one farm to another, the practice of washing and disinfecting it as it leaves the donor farm and doing this again before it enters the recipient farm (otherwise known as wash off, wash on) should always be practised. In addition, if you can have a long down time between the two 'washes', all the better!

Sometimes you may have to spend a little money. For example, it is far better to have a dedicated brush in each house, rather than have one brush servicing several houses. It is impossible to thoroughly clean the head of a soiled brush!

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