

Dr Winslow's duck: correction of a surgical myth concerning tracheobronchial injury.

Letter to the editor

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Text 467 words

Dear Editor

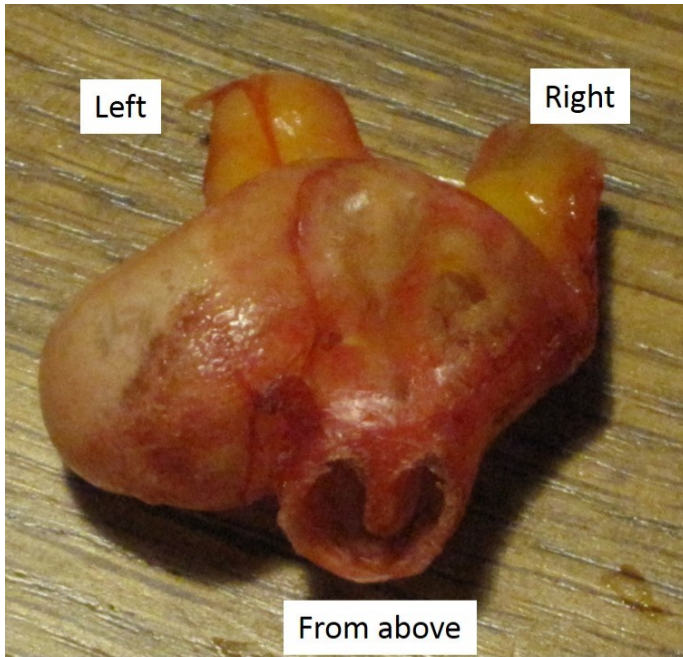
Historians are very aware of the perpetuation of myths by the retelling of stories. A feature of myths is that they are intrinsically unlikely which is why they are told and retold; the obvious and mundane does not bear repetition. A historical reference chanced upon in the course of an editing job on a textbook looked as if it might qualify as a myth. It was sufficiently intriguing to look into further and maybe merits correction for the record.

In 1871 what was thought to be a healed rupture of the bronchus was reported in the medical literature. A cook preparing a pair of wild duck for a doctor's dinner found a cartilaginous structure in one and brought it to show him. He established that it was not present in the other of the pair and deduced that this was a healed tracheobronchial injury. He described it as a 'beautiful example of the conservative power of nature'.^[1] As a written record Dr Winslow's duck was referred to in Thorax in 1949^[2] and cited in a case series in 1987.^[3] It appears again in a Review in the Annals in 2001.^[4] It is referred to in Wikipediaⁱ. Who knows how often it is retold in the oral tradition of surgical teaching?

About five years ago I while preparing a home reared drake for the table. I had noted this anatomy and wondered what it was. My brother who had come for lunch and who knows all sorts of interesting things told me that this was a normal occurrence in ducks. Unaware of Winslow's duck I thought little more of it until editing the textbook in 2014. From then on I kept record of my findings in seven consecutive ducks and found Winslow's anatomy in both of two males and none of five females. In case the thought springs to mind, that is statistically significant for difference between the sexes (2/2 vs 0/5; $P < 0.05$ Fisher's test). What is more useful is that the anatomy of the duck is well known and has recently been brought up to date, elegantly described and beautifully illustrated, in a Turkish veterinary journal.^[5]

Legend

Left. The freshly dissected tracheobronchial junction of a male duck viewed from above. Right. Two dried specimens show for scale with a one euro coin.



Reference List

- 1 Winslow W: Rupture of bronchus of wild duck. *Medical Times (Philadelphia)* 1871;1:255.
- 2 Griffith J: Fracture of the bronchus. *Thorax* 1949;4:105-109.
- 3 Roxburgh JC: Rupture of the tracheobronchial tree. *Thorax* 1987;42:681-688.
- 4 Kiser AC, O'Brien SM, Detterbeck FC: Blunt tracheobronchial injuries: treatment and outcomes. *Ann Thorac Surg* 2001;71:2059-2065.
- 5 Yilmaz B, Yilmaz R, Arican I, Yidiz H: Anatomical Structure of the Syrinx in the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). *Harran Univ Vet Fak Deg* 2012;1:111-116.

ⁱ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracheobronchial_injury (4th April 2016))