



SAFETY PROTOCOLS STEPPED UP AFTER ROUTINE TESTS SHOW STAFF TUBERCULOSIS EXPOSURE AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM

No known active cases and no risk to the public, say health officials

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Sept. 25, 2019

TACOMA, Wash. – Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium leaders are taking extra steps to ensure the health and safety of their staff, visitors and animals after some staff members who work with and around elephants tested positive for latent tuberculosis infection.

Tuberculosis spreads only in the active stage. Currently, tests show no active cases of the disease in people. Test results on the elephants are pending.

"When results from routine tests from several staff members suggested possible tuberculosis exposure, we contacted state and local public health experts for guidance and implemented additional safety protocols in our elephant area," said Alan Varsik, director of Zoological & Environmental Education for Metro Parks Tacoma. "Keeping our staff, animals and the public safe is our top priority."

Officials with Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department are supporting the disease investigation.

"People with latent TB are not sick and cannot infect anyone," said Matthew Rollosson, public health nurse with Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. "You have to spend a lot of time close to a person or animal with active TB to catch the disease."

"Tuberculosis is not easy to get and requires close, prolonged contact with active cases," he added. "Examples would include sharing living space or daily care of a person or animal with active TB, or ongoing physical contact. Because the elephants are in an outside area during their public viewing time, we are not concerned about exposure risk to the public."

The disease has two stages: latent and active. Most people with latent TB never develop active TB, and the disease is not contagious at the latent stage. A positive test does not mean someone has active TB but instead has been exposed to the bacteria. Individuals with latent TB infection can be treated with antibiotics to prevent active TB disease from developing.

The local Health Department has confirmed the zoo staff cases are latent. The zoo's two elephants, Hanako and Suki, are not showing any symptoms of active tuberculosis, according to the zoo's head veterinarian, Dr. Karen Wolf, but test results are pending. Zoo officials also continue to consult with public health experts at the Washington State Department of Health and the state veterinarian with the Washington State Department of Agriculture to support the animal disease investigation.

In Washington, there are around 200 cases annually and between 15 and 25 every year in Pierce County. TB has been reported in elephants as far back as 1875 and occurs in elephants in the wild and in zoos.

The Tacoma zoo annually tests Hanako and Suki by collecting fluid from their trunks and sending it to a certified laboratory for testing as part of a comprehensive health program. The testing meets standards of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.

Additional elephant "trunk wash" cultures are in process and zoo officials expect results in about eight weeks, the length of time it takes to culture the bacteria for accurate diagnosis. While zoo officials wait for more test results, they have added stricter protocols for all staff who care for the elephants and limited the staff who enter animal areas, based on recommendations from local and state health officials.

Hanako and Suki continue to spend time in their outdoor habitat, which provides a physical barrier of more than 14 feet from the public. Health officials inspected the exhibit area and deemed it safe for visitors.

For more information about tuberculosis, visit the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department web page at <https://www.tpchd.org/healthy-people/diseases/tuberculosis-tb>.

###

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources. A member of the [Metro Parks Tacoma](#) family, the zoo creates a legacy of sustainability for future generations through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities; it also embodies Metro Parks' mission of creating healthy opportunities to play, learn and grow. The zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department's mission is to protect and improve the health of all people and places in Pierce County. As part of our mission, the Health Department tackles known and emerging health risks through policy, programs and treatment to protect public health. We are one of roughly 244 accredited health departments in the country and among six in the state to have met or exceeded the [Public Health Accreditation Board's](#) quality standards. Learn more at www.tpchd.org.

Contacts

Whitney DalBalcon, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, 253-278-6343 or whitney.dalbalcon@pdza.org
Edie Jeffers, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, 253-798-2853 or EJeffers@tpchd.org