



VETERINARIANS BEGIN TUBERCULOSIS TREATMENT OF ELDERLY ELEPHANT SUKI

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TACOMA, Wash. – Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium veterinarians began a yearlong treatment regimen today for Suki, an elderly female Asian elephant who has tested positive for tuberculosis, officials announced.

“Suki has not shown signs of TB-related illness and, with appropriate medical treatment, we’re hopeful she never will,” said head veterinarian Dr. Karen Wolf. “Today was her first day of treatment and she did very well,” said Dr. Wolf, adding that the elderly elephant had to swallow 13 medicine capsules, each over three inches long.

Dr. Wolf has been working with other elephant veterinarians with experience treating tuberculosis to develop the most effective treatment regimen for Suki, and the zoo’s elephant-care team has been training Suki for months to swallow giant practice capsules.

Suki is in good health for a 56-year-old elephant and continues to actively engage with her caregivers and participate in routine exercise and enrichment programs, said Dr. Wolf. The median life expectancy is 47 for female Asian elephants in human care.

The elderly elephant will continue to spend time in her outdoor habitat in view of the public during her yearlong treatment. Public health officials have inspected the outdoor elephant viewing area and deemed it safe for zoo visitors.

Zoo leaders have worked closely with public health experts to implement strict protocols to ensure the safety of staff and guests, said Alan Varsik, director of Zoological and Environmental Education for Metro Parks Tacoma. “Keeping everyone safe and healthy is paramount for us and guides every decision we make,” said Varsik.

Zoo officials first contacted public health experts in September 2019 when some staff members who work in the elephant area tested positive for a latent, or noncontagious, form of tuberculosis. Suki and the zoo’s other elephant, Hanako, were diagnosed with tuberculosis in November 2019. After consulting with TB experts, Dr. Wolf and the elephant-care team decided that attempting to treat the two elderly elephants was too high risk.

Hanako, who was also fighting cancer, was too medically fragile and would not have reliably taken her prescribed medicine or participated in regular blood draws to assess her organ function and the antibiotic levels in her blood, said Dr. Wolf. Failure to consistently take the prescribed antibiotics could have led to a drug-resistant form of TB, according to Dr. Wolf. And treating Suki, and not Hanako, would have led to Suki’s re-infection because the two elephants lived in close proximity.

“We weren’t willing to take those risks,” said Dr. Wolf.

When Hanako died earlier this year, Dr. Wolf and her caregivers decided to try treating Suki, developing a yearlong treatment regimen coupled with comprehensive testing protocols to measure her progress.

“Suki is an exceptional elephant, very smart and a quick learner,” said Dr. Wolf. “But before we could begin treating her, we had to be 100 percent confident that she would take all her pills as prescribed.” Teaching an elderly elephant to reliably take oral medication is a painstaking process that can take many months, said Dr. Wolf.

The elephant-care team patiently began training Suki to swallow, not chew, increasingly larger practice capsules by rewarding her with watermelon and other favorite treats until swallowing behavior was reliably established. And the zoo’s veterinary technicians began the time-intensive process of formulating giant gelatin capsules to mask the taste of the bitter-tasting medicine inside.

Under an innovative drug-delivery system developed by Oregon Zoo, each medicine capsule is filled and coated with coconut oil, and then frozen. By the time the frozen oil dissolves, the antibiotics are well past Suki’s taste buds and making their way through her system to fight the infection.

Suki’s caregivers will monitor her closely for medication side effects, which can include severe diarrhea, appetite loss, abdominal discomfort and liver failure. Veterinarians also will track the elderly elephant’s health by regularly evaluating her bloodwork and assessing her progress through trunk cultures, taken by collecting fluids from her trunk as required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.

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