



Veterinary specialists do intricate eye surgery at Metroparks Zoo

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By **James Ewinger, The Plain Dealer**

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Two sea lions and a harbor seal are likely to live more comfortably at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo because of three highly specialized veterinarians who made a house call from Florida.

Seals, sea lions and walruses all belong to a suborder of aquatic mammals called pinnipeds. All are prone to eye problems in captivity.

The Metroparks' Zoo called on ophthalmologist Dr. Carmen Colitz, aquatic mammal specialist Dr. Mike Renner (who used to work with Seaworld when it was open in Aurora) and veterinary anesthesiologist Dr. James Bailey.



Joe Yachanin, Metroparks Zoo

Animal keeper Andrew Smyser, Dr. James Bailey, veterinary technician Chris Peterson, Dr. Mike Selig, Dr. Mike Renner and animal keeper Joe Carroscia perform eye surgery on Buzz a 3-year-old California sea lion, at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo Tuesday afternoon.

Each has a separate and more generalized practice in Florida, and all come together for operations like the ones they performed Tuesday and Wednesday.

Buzz, a 3-year-old California sea lion, had cataracts even before he came to the zoo two years ago. The surgery should restore some vision to his right eye. Vision in his left eye could not be saved because of a detached retina but the team was able to relieve discomfort.

Mikey, 21, and the oldest sea lion at the zoo, had a cataract procedure on his right eye.

The team also operated on the lenses in both of Nemo's eyes. He is a 25-year-old harbor seal.

The vets said pinnipeds are more likely to develop eye problems in captivity because they live longer. Data on the creatures in the wild is limited, they said, because the ones they are most likely to see are stranded because of injury or malnutrition, which makes them vulnerable to numerous complications.

Renner said that before Colitz and similar specialists arrived, places like Seaworld and the zoo would often call on local ophthalmologists who were medical doctors.

Such crossovers still occur. In late January, a female orangutan at the Metroparks Zoo received an implanted birth-control device from a Cleveland Clinic physician specializing in women's health issues.

Colitz said her veterinary specialty didn't even exist until the 1960s, and Bailey said his came along in the '70s.

Most veterinarians will be called upon to perform dentistry, administer anesthesia and a host of other procedures that almost always done by specialists in the medical field.

Bailey said veterinarians and medical doctors maintain strong ties in academia and share great mutual respect.

He said zoo veterinarians face some of science's greatest challenges because of the hundreds of different species under their care. He joked that the MDs have an advantage "because they just work with those hairless monkeys."

The team said there are some issues unique to pinnipeds.

Their eyes cannot be dilated with drops and must be injected. Some blood vessels are not as accessible as those in humans, and getting them to wear a mask can be a challenge.

"They are captive animals but not domesticated," Bailey said, which can create safety problems for doctor and patient alike.

But the team praised the Metroparks Zoo for the extent of their preparation. Dr. Michael Selig, one of the zoo's staff vets, began making arrangements in December, and keeper under the director of curator Andi Kornak trained the pinnipeds to accept anesthesia masks.

Bailey called the zoo's Sarah Allison Steffee Center for Zoological Medicine one of the best facilities in the country.

Dr. Albert Lewandowski, the zoo's chief veterinarian, said the plan is to keep the three patients in the hospital at least for several weeks, giving them access to pools as they improve.

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