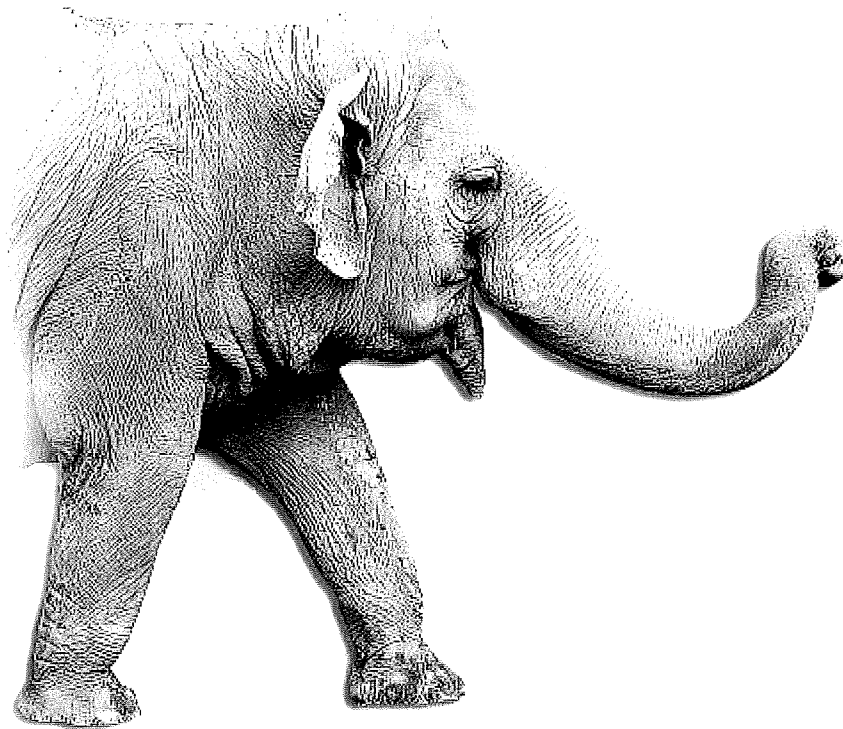


Relax, folks. Lucy's not going anywhere

The veterinarian who knows her best says best interests are served right here at home

BY DR. MILTON NESS, FREELANCE SEPTEMBER 19, 2009



Surrounded by controversy, Lucy the Asian elephant calmly enjoys a morning walk at Edmonton's Valley Zoo on June 30.

Photograph by: Chris Schwarz, The Journal, Freelance

As Lucy's veterinarian, I am the person responsible for ensuring that her emotional and physical health needs are being met. I believe it's time to clearly establish, on the public record, that I will not concede to any campaign which demands Lucy be moved because to do so would put her life at risk.

Her medical condition precludes such a move right now--but in assessing Lucy's best interest in the future, we need to look at this wonderful animal as a full living being. Lucy is not just any elephant. She is a particular elephant with unique issues and needs.

Elephants are highly individual animals. They can feel and express empathy, have the capacity for memory of people and experiences --and they display emotion. In order to fully understand Lucy's health and her well-being, we need to recognize and acknowledge her history, experiences, medical needs, attachments and sources of stress and comfort.

At 34 years of age, Lucy is in stable health and has a fulfilling and comfortable life. However, she has a particularly complicated medical issue that must be acknowledged and responsibly managed.

Lucy has a breathing problem. She first developed a tendency for open-mouthed breathing in 2004. This occurred at the same time she began having dental problems related to a malformed and malpositioned molar.

While the cause of Lucy's breathing problems is not yet conclusively diagnosed, there is reason to believe it is linked to her dental problem. I have consulted on an ongoing basis with Dr. James Oosterhuis, an elephant specialist and an acknowledged expert in the area of large-mammal dental health.

With the loss of her tooth at the end of August, we decided it was important to have Dr. Oosterhuis have another look at Lucy. He examined her again last week. Dr. Oosterhuis found Lucy to be a calm, friendly elephant who is very comfortable in her home environment and displayed no behavioural problems. After an extensive examination of her trunk and upper respiratory passages which required sedation, he concluded that Lucy's breathing problem was real and serious.

The endoscope examination he conducted is a leading-edge technology when used for elephant diagnostics and it definitively showed significant swelling in her upper respiratory passage.

Again, Lucy's problem may be linked to her dental condition, but I believe it is important to rule out other possible causes so we can effectively treat Lucy and hopefully restore her to a fuller breathing capacity. In the following months, I will develop a diagnostic and treatment plan in consultation with Dr. Oosterhuis, and other specialists when necessary, to treat Lucy's symptoms and hopefully determine what exactly is causing her constricted airways.

Unfortunately, neither Dr. Oosterhuis nor myself can predict how long this process will take, nor how much improvement will eventually be achieved in her breathing. What we do know is that moving Lucy would be life-threatening and we will not put her at risk simply to satisfy those who are campaigning to move her.

The diagnostic procedure that we undertook last week is not simple, and even it presented risks. An exam of this degree of thoroughness is necessary to fully understand her problem and symptoms and, given the risks, we won't allow Lucy to be put through another such exam without a clear reason.

For the record, in response to those who say we are not open to a second opinion on Lucy's diagnosis-let me present some facts. I have regularly consulted with a number of veterinarians and specialists about Lucy's care, and will continue to do so. For example, in August, I met with the elephant team at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D. C.

In addition, the Valley Zoo consults regularly with the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums

and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) animal experts. Both organizations support my medical position on Lucy and CFIA acknowledges that transporting her would contravene the humane transport of animals under the Health of Animals Regulations of the federal Health of Animals Act.

I must also point out that Dr. Oosterhuis's findings are not subjective. He is a recognized specialist and the diagnostic tool used in the procedure provides a digital record of Lucy's condition.

Under stress, or during other times of increased need for oxygen, Lucy's ability to breathe is stretched almost beyond her capacity. It is imperative to keep her calm, quiet and properly managed to prevent any unnecessary or excessive stress. We will continue to monitor her fully and to respond to her health needs. Lucy must remain in Edmonton because it best meets her physical and emotional needs.

My position is based on sound diagnostics and rigorous consultation with outside experts. Any rhetoric that implies that the professionals who diagnose and treat Lucy are doing less than their professional standards and ethics require is unfounded and unacceptable.

It is time to allow Lucy's care-giving team to address her health needs and her long-term well-being.

After all, isn't that what matters most?

Dr. Milton Ness is the Edmonton Valley Zoo veterinarian.

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