

- **Screening and Testing For Tuberculosis in Elephants**

Recently, animal rights activist groups have released "selected" documents to bolster their allegations and distortions regarding tuberculosis in elephants. *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*® asked Dr. Dennis Schmitt, our Chair of Veterinary Services and Director of Research, to clarify any misconceptions about tuberculosis in captive elephants.

Frequently Asked Questions About Tuberculosis In Elephants *Answered by Dr. Dennis Schmitt*

Dr. Schmitt is a leading veterinary consultant in elephant medical management and breeding programs for several zoos and circuses in North America. His research work includes the first Asian elephant produced from artificial insemination. Dr. Schmitt also was an advisor on elephant reproduction for National Geographic's Channel: In the Womb Animals, which aired in December 2006. He is board certified in Theriogenology (veterinary reproduction) and served as the reproductive advisor for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums elephant TAG/SPP management group. Dr. Schmitt is a member of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources and a founding member of the Tb Working Group.

Q. How does an elephant get tuberculosis?

A. In general, tuberculosis is believed to be contracted only through prolonged exposure to the air-borne bacteria. While scientists continue to conduct further research on transmission, the important thing to remember is that as part of our preventive medicine program at *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*, our animals are annually screened and, if tuberculosis is detected, notification is provided to the appropriate agencies and treatment prescribed.

Q. Can elephants contract the same strain of tuberculosis as humans?

A. The strain of tuberculosis, the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, that is found in elephants can be found in humans, however there has been no proven case of the tuberculosis bacterium being transmitted from elephants to humans.

Q. Weren't there studies done stating otherwise?

A. The data in those studies did not prove that tuberculosis bacterium was transmitted from elephants to humans.

Q. Can humans get tuberculosis from elephants?

A. There has been no proven case of the tuberculosis bacterium being transmitted from elephants to humans.

Q. Do elephants that test positive for tuberculosis display any symptoms?

A. Common sense tells you that there are many symptoms that can be misdiagnosed for any illness like an allergy can be misdiagnosed as a cold. So as part of *Ringling Bros.*® preventive medicine program our animals and staff are screened and, if tuberculosis is detected, immediate notification is provided to the appropriate agencies and treatment prescribed.

Q. Do the elephants have multi drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-Tb)?

A. No.

Q. How do elephants respond to the treatment of tuberculosis?

A. As with treating any animal or human, response to treatments will vary and changes to treatment will be prescribed. All of the animals at *Ringling Bros.* are looked over daily as part of our preventive medicine program.

Q. What if an elephant doesn't respond to treatment?

A. We will prescribe another treatment.

Q. Have any of *Ringling Bros.* elephants been euthanized as a result of TB?

A. No.

Q. Is this the first time tuberculosis has occurred at *Ringling Bros.*?

A. While no actively touring elephant has tested positive for tuberculosis, over the years there have been retired elephants and other elephants that did not travel with the circus that tested positive for tuberculosis and all of those elephants were successfully treated.

Q. What is *Ringling Bros.* doing to help keep the elephants and the public safe from contracting tuberculosis?

A. As part of *Ringling Bros.* preventive medicine program our animals and staff are screened and, if tuberculosis is detected, immediate notification is provided to the appropriate agencies and treatment prescribed.

Moreover, *Ringling Bros.* and *Barnum & Bailey* veterinary team is a member of the animal husbandry industry's Elephant TB Working Group. The group has been in existence for a number of years and includes representatives from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), American Association of Zoo Veterinarians (AAZV), Busch Gardens, and Disney's Animal Kingdom. *Ringling Bros.* has collaborated and offered recommendations for diagnosis, treatment, prevention and control of Tb in captive elephant population(s). A subset of this group has come together to address the research needs of the group and look at possible diagnostic tests that could give earlier detection in elephants than the current trunk wash and culture techniques.

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For information please visit:

www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/ElephTBGuidelines2000.html