

Vet for Dallas Zoo pays house calls to exotics

DALLAS (AP) — In an era of medical specialists, Dr. Bonnie L. Raphael is an extraordinary generalist.

Among her 2,000 regular patients, she counts no less than 450 different species, arising from all corners of nature's kingdom. Lions and lizards and venomous snakes, tapirs and tortoises and mona monkeys, she sees them all.

At 35, Raphael is the staff veterinarian at the Dallas Zoo and one of only 17 people in the United States certified by the American College of Zoological Medicine for her medical knowledge of exotic animals.

Among her regular patients are more celebrities than a Beverly Hills M.D. could ever hope to claim. The zoo's collection includes more than 100 endangered species, including rare okapis, lowland gorillas, East African bongos, grey's zebras, Siberian tigers, black rhinos and reticulated giraffes.

House calls, a vestige of another generation in the medical profession, are still as common as penicillin in her practice.

"I try to make round through the zoo almost every day," Raphael says. One of only 126 full-time zoo vets among approximately 20,000 veterinarians in the United States, she earned her special certification after completing a residency program and passing a two-day examination.

"Where I go just depends on who's sick," she says. "One afternoon I may visit the snakes and reptiles. But then, if one of the primates gets sick, I'll head over to the monkey house."

She also practices preventive medicine. One recent afternoon was spent giving physical exams to the zoo's mona monkeys. During the checkup, Raphael collected blood samples from the feisty 4-pound primates, ran TB tests, dental exams and checked for intestinal bacteria. X-rays help her assess each monkey's heart and lungs.

As a matter of survival, Raphael has cultivated an impeccable bedside manner. It's little wonder why. She'd pay dearly if she caused a patient like Rosco, a 3,500-pound black rhinoceros, any personal offense.

As Raphael climbed into Rosco's pen one recent afternoon, she

sounded like a doting mother attending to a child's skinned knee.

"Hey son, they say your foot's sore," Raphael said in a voice as smooth as honey.

Like a Swedish masseuse, she gingerly poked and kneaded Rosco's ponderous hind foot while a zoo keeper scratched the rhino's back with an industrial scrub brush. All this attention was more than Rosco could endure standing up. He obligingly lay down on his side, shut his eyes and seemed ready to purr like a pussycat.

"He likes my tender fingers," Raphael said as she searched for an abscess or some other injury that might explain why zoo keepers had earlier observed Rosco limping.

From this endangered black rhino, Raphael continued her

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rounds, moving next to an assembly of giraffes.

"This is Bonnie," she said, pausing to watch an elderly giraffe. "She is old — 33 or 34 — and real arthritic. Her lower joints are really slowing down on her."

This day Bonnie looked OK, and so Raphael continued on her rounds.

Rambling through the zoo, she later looked in on Cape buffalo and flamingos, klipspringers and orangutans.

It is her job to keep the zoo's 2,000 residents — many of which cannot easily be replaced — healthy and whole and, when possible, reproducing. Often Raphael must work by instinct, led only by careful obser-

vation and common sense. Medical research pertaining to many of the animals is scant and for many others there is no reference material at all to consult in time of illness.

Her days are often as motley as the creatures in the zoo. One morning may require her to perform surgery on a reptile while in the afternoon she might have to spend several hours vaccinating baboons. The wall calendar in her tiny clinic is clutter of appointments with bison, addax, gorillas and large cats.

The constant flux of a zoo vet's life is its own vexation and reward. She is on call 24 hours a day and her work is never done.

When the zoo's small herd of suni, miniature antelope indigenous to Southeast Africa, were stricken two weeks ago with an epidemic of pneumonia, Raphael had to drop nearly everything else. Three of 20 sunis died in one week.

She began administering a series of antibiotics and the experimental drug interferon to help the rest of these rare creatures, which are the size of poodles with pencil thin legs, fight off illness. The strategy seems to be working.

Raphael says she recognized early in life what was her chosen course.

"Sometimes when I was about 5 years old and we were taking our boxer to the vets, I said, 'Gee, I want to be a vet,'" she recalls.

Her parents were supportive, and she eventually earned her degree in veterinary medicine from Michigan State University. After several years of ordinary private practice, she began her focus on exotic animals.

Then, in 1981, she was chosen to become the Dallas Zoo's first full-time veterinarian. Working together, Raphael and a cadre of professionally trained zoo curators have made major improvements in animal management at the zoo.

One of these advances is that the survival rate of newly born zoo animals jumped from 20 to 75 percent during the four-year period between 1979 and 1983.

In addition, Raphael has extended the zoo's involvement with a variety of research programs, including an embryo-transplant project to help bolster the declining populations of rare and endangered animals.



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