

Faculty Veterinarians in an attempt to restore vulture's eyesight with a first of its kind operation

By CvB

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Lucky, the young vulture with one of the clearly visible cataracts before the operation

Veterinarians of the Faculty of Veterinary Science on Friday morning successfully performed an operation to save and restore a vulture's eyesight which was affected by cataracts. The operation that was completed in just over an hour not only was the first of its kind done on any vulture species in Africa but also the first of its kind on a bird of the Gyps species in the world.

The African White-backed vulture (*Gyps Africanus*) was recently brought to the Faculty's Veterinary Academic Hospital by Ms Kerri Wolter, Manager of the Vulture Programme of the Rhino & Lion Wildlife Conservation NPO, after the vulture was removed from a harmful environment in which the bird was kept in captivity in the Free State province.

In pre-tests the 11 months old vulture dubbed Lucky was diagnosed with cataracts in both eyes causing him to be almost fully blind. Naturally this condition could be life-threatening to the vulture because of his dependency on his eyes in his search for food. It is not sure if the vulture was born blind or if it was caused by some kind of trauma.

It was decided to perform an operation on both the vulture's eyes through a procedure known as Phacoemulsification. Initial scanning of the eyes showed that the areas underneath the lenses were clear, giving it the green light for an operation. The aim was obviously to restore his eyesight in the hope of enabling the bird to lead a normal life. The operation was done by Dr Izak Venter of the Ophthalmology Clinic in the Faculty's Veterinary Academic Hospital and entailed the removal of the birds' lenses causing him to be presbyopic or long-sighted.

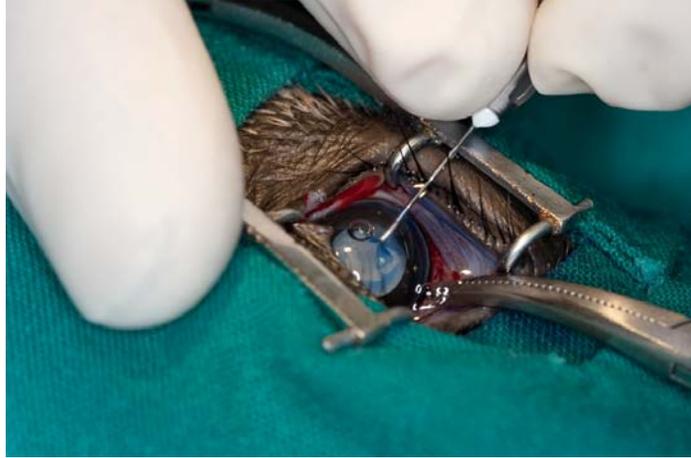
According to Dr Venter the surgery went well and the prognosis is good. The vulture was put on a drip and is in a stable condition while recovering from the affects of the anaesthetics that were administered. "The next important phase will be the six weeks post-operative treatment that will follow which will include the regular administration of antibiotics and eye drops", Dr Venter said. He will see the vulture again on Monday 19 October for a first post-op consultation with a follow-on consultation after a further two weeks.

Phacoemulsification is a modified version of the so-called extracapsular cataract extraction (ECCE) and is the most common surgical procedure for removing cataracts. It involves removing the eye's natural lens while leaving in place the back of the capsule, which holds the lens in place. The difference with this procedure is that the cataract is broken into tiny pieces that are suctioned from the eye through a smaller incision than that required by other forms of cataract surgery. Healing and rehabilitation are faster with this procedure, and there is little, if any, discomfort.

The operation commenced at about 09:45 on Friday morning. Dr Venter, who is also working at the Johannesburg Animal Eye Hospital, was assisted by Dr Leon Venter from the Faculty's Department of Paraclinical Sciences who acted as the Veterinary Anaesthesiologist for the operation.

Once it is determined that the vulture's condition is satisfactory, he will be released back in the wild.

Among others, the operation was covered by National Geographic, the SABC, and various newspapers.



One of the cataracts is being removed during the operation through a procedure known as phacoemulsification (Pic: Dr Leon Venter, Faculty of Veterinary Science)