

University of Pretoria's Faculty of Veterinary Science opens wildlife clinic

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The University of Pretoria's (UP) **Faculty of Veterinary Science** opened a dedicated wildlife clinic at its Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital (OVAH) on Friday, 6 March.

The Faculty is the only one of its kind in the country and is celebrating its centenary this year. The OVAH provides world-class practical training to final-year veterinary and veterinary nursing students. It has facilities that render myriad services to all animal species, and can accommodate anything from a pet lizard to a large bull.



One of the wildlife clinic's most recent patients, Badgie the honey badger, ready to undergo a CT-scan in the Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital.

According to Dr Paul van Dam, newly appointed Director of the OVAH, "there has been a need for a dedicated facility for wildlife that is managed with the highest care available to the patients. Having facilities on the Onderstepoort Campus allows easy access to all the clinical specialists as well as services offered by the OVAH and the diagnostic laboratories on campus."

He explained that being able to accommodate the animals in these facilities has the additional advantage that a more comprehensive and dedicated service can be provided. In the past, wildlife had to be released to the owner's farm after initial treatment, making follow-up treatment a challenge.

According to Dr Van Dam, “The facility is unique in the sense that it will be used to hospitalise clients’ animals. Similar facilities exist, for example at zoos, but these are all only used for the entity’s own animals.”



UP Vice-Chancellor Professor Tawana Kupe (right in suit) inspects the facilities with students from the Faculty of Veterinary Science.

This new clinic comprises two buildings – herbivore bomas and one that accommodates carnivores. It meets the legal requirements of the Department of Environmental Affairs and the Department of Agriculture. All facilities that accommodate wildlife have to meet the stringent standards set by the Department of Environmental Affairs and are primarily aimed at animal welfare. Once they approve the facilities, the Department of Agriculture (Veterinary Services) has to approve the facilities from an animal disease control point of view, explained Dr Van Dam.

The clinic can accommodate carnivores up to the size of lions, as well as herbivores, from small antelope to the size of young rhino. Patients come from South African game farms, zoos and other registered wildlife breeding and holding facilities. “With the new facilities, animals can be kept under close supervision and regular treatment is now possible. It also allows the wildlife clinicians to perform more specialist diagnostic procedures than would be possible on the farm,” said Dr Van Dam.

While the Faculty’s wildlife clinicians have the expertise to treat all species of wildlife, they can now also call on specialists from other disciplines in the OVAH for procedures – including radiology, surgery, anaesthesiology, medicine and reproduction.



Seven-year-old tiger Sombra was the clinic's first patient.

Dean of the Faculty, Professor Vinny Naidoo, said in addition to the actual management of wildlife under hospitalised conditions, the general training of students in hospitalised care of wildlife is important. "This will allow our new graduates the opportunity to be more innovative in how they manage wildlife when they get into practice. If one looks at the equine industry, the introduction of specialised equine care at the academic hospital many years ago has completely changed how equine patients are managed nowadays."

He predicts the same positive effect of training veterinary students in the hospital care of wildlife – the major impact of the facility will be the advancement of the field of wildlife medicine in the near future.

The Faculty's wildlife expertise is far-reaching: last year some of the lesser flamingos (*Phoeniconaias minor*) rescued from Kimberley's Kamfers Dam were nursed to good health by Dr Katja Koeppel, a veterinary wildlife specialist in the Faculty and Dr Dorianne Elliot, manager and owner of the Bird and Exotic Animal Clinic in the OVAH. Other organisations were also involved. These flamingos are close to being threatened according to the IUCN Red list.

The clinic's first patient, seven-year-old tiger Sombra, was rescued by Animal Defenders International from a circus in Guatemala. She was recently treated by a team that included Professor Adrian Tordiffe, Associate Professor of Veterinary Pharmacology and wildlife specialist,

who believed she has a rare genetic abnormality that prevents her kidneys from reabsorbing enough potassium.

UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor Tawana Kupe said at the opening of the clinic, “I am proud of the expertise of our wildlife vets who have built a reputation for excellence worldwide. Not only are they called on for their expertise in wide-ranging areas, but our vets also play an important role in the conservation of endangered wildlife species.”

He said that by adding this brand-new facility to the Faculty’s services and expertise, “the Faculty is providing impetus to producing cutting-edge research that is aligned with the needs of the local and global wildlife fraternity”.

- Author Prim Gower

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