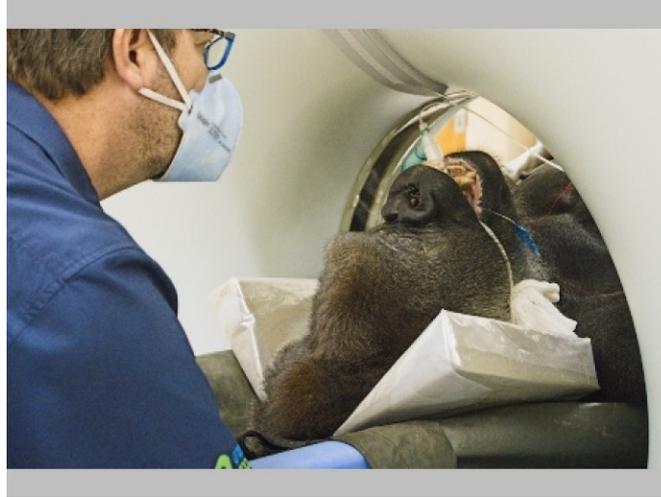


# No “Mission Impossible” after airlifting a gorilla by helicopter to the Faculty for a CT scan

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Prof Gerhard Steenkamp oversees the CT scan of Makokou's nose

The special patient aboard the helicopter was Makokou, a 34-year-old male Western lowland gorilla from the Johannesburg Zoo who was airlifted to Onderstepoort for a CT scan of his nasal passages.

The Johannesburg Zoo veterinarian and Faculty alumnus, Dr Kresen Pillay, had treated Makokou several times since December 2019 when he first developed a discharge from his nose. The recurrence of the symptoms, however, indicated that there was a more serious underlying problem. On 20 May, a team of veterinary specialists from the Faculty of the University of Pretoria, gathered at the Johannesburg Zoo to assist Dr Pillay with an extensive health examination of Makokou.

The examination included a wide range of blood tests, chest x-rays, a dental and eye examination as well as a heart ultrasound scan. Prof Gerhard Steenkamp, a veterinary dentist and maxillofacial surgeon at the faculty, examined Makokou’s nasal passages. He found that they were almost entirely blocked with what looked like several tumors.

He collected some biopsies from one of the intranasal masses. These were later confirmed to be inflammatory masses or polyps. There was some relief that no cancerous cells were found in the biopsied tissue. Some of the tests to evaluate Makoko’s heart, however, indicated that he had early heart disease and the intranasal tumours would still need to be surgically removed.

After the initial examination, the team planned to get Makokou to the Faculty’s Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital (OVAH) for a CT scan so that Prof Steenkamp could assess the extent of the mass in the gorilla’s nose. Due to his size and strength and the potential stress involved, it was clear that the gorilla would have to be anaesthetised for the entire journey to the hospital. Since road transport would take too long, the team arranged a helicopter through the NGO Flying for Freedom SA to transport Makokou to and from Onderstepoort for the procedure.

The helicopter big enough for this purpose belongs to Mike Barnes from the company MCC Aviation who supports Flying for Freedom SA and who offered his services at no cost.

On Saturday morning, Dr Pillay and Dr Justin Grace, also from the Faculty, anaesthetised Makokou in his enclosure and they flew with him to the Veterinary Academic Hospital, where Prof Steenkamp and Prof Adrian Tordiffe, a wildlife specialist from the faculty with experience in the medical management of gorillas, were waiting to conduct the scan. The Faculty’s vets and other staff involved also volunteered their time and expertise to assist Makokou.

The procedure went according to plan, but the results confirmed that the inflammatory tissue had filled most of

Makokou's nasal passages and sinuses. Prof Steenkamp and Dr Kobus Venter, a local ear-nose and throat surgeon, evaluated the CT scans and have started making plans for what is likely to be quite extensive nasal surgery. The surgery will take place at the Johannesburg Zoo's veterinary hospital in three weeks' time. After the CT-scans, Makokou was safely returned to his night room at the Joburg Zoo.

The well-known company, dnata that has partnered with the University of Pretoria to protect endangered animals through the Wild over Wildlife programme, has offered to pay for the CT-scans



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