

Web Update 2nd May 2012

No cases of human Tuberculosis following identification of two animals with Tuberculosis at Taronga Zoo in 2010 and 2011

A recent public health investigation into the risk to humans of tuberculosis from animals at Taronga Zoo has found no cases of tuberculosis among zoo staff.

The investigation found that the risk of exposure to tuberculosis was limited to those staff who worked in close proximity to the infectious elephant and the risk to other staff and visitors to the zoo was extremely low.

Currently, there are no animals or people identified with active tuberculosis disease at the Zoo, and visitors are not at risk of infection.

Testing of staff

An elephant and a chimpanzee in the Zoo were diagnosed with tuberculosis in late 2010 and September 2011.

The strain of tuberculosis responsible for the disease in both animals was the same strain, suggesting that spread had occurred between the two animals. With each diagnosis, NSW Health ensured all zoo staff in close contact with the animals were assessed and tested for tuberculosis.

NSW Ministry of Health staff worked closely with the Zoo and other experts to conduct a wide ranging investigation to better understand how the two animals developed tuberculosis and to identify any risk to staff.

The investigation, overseen by a panel of experts, involved the screening of zoo staff members who were in contact with either the elephant or chimpanzee exhibits while the animals were potentially infectious, or in the area between the exhibits.

The 147 staff members included a broad range of people who were assessed using a questionnaire and interviews. Based on this information, a subgroup was then screened using a tuberculin skin test (TST). Those who had a positive TST result had a chest x-ray and additional specialist advice to determine if they had active tuberculosis disease.

Of the people who underwent tuberculin skin tests 87% had negative tuberculin skin tests and 8% had positive tuberculin skin tests, most likely from past exposure to the disease unrelated to the zoo.

A range of staff reported close proximity to both animals. In a few cases, a positive TST could possibly be attributed to recent exposure. These staff members were offered treatment and follow up for any latent infection.

There are no people or animals identified with active tuberculosis disease at the Zoo, and visitors are not at risk of infection.

Veterinarians at the zoo have also assessed the risk of infection in other animals. A summary of that investigation follows:

As part of the overall investigation, Zoo veterinarians have undertaken TB testing on over 200 animals including 184 zoo animals as well as free-ranging animals in the zoo grounds.

The testing has been conducted through the Taronga Wildlife Hospital and in-house pathology services as well as external laboratories.

There are currently no animals at the zoo identified with active tuberculosis.

When the chimpanzee was diagnosed (and later euthanased), the zoo tested all the remaining chimps and took the precaution of placing them all on treatment. Retesting on the chimpanzee group earlier this year indicated that further precautionary treatment for the entire group was no longer necessary.

The elephant that was originally diagnosed with the infection has concluded a 12-month course of treatment and is being closely monitored to ensure she is fully cured.

Further information about tuberculosis

Around a third of the world's population, although much less in Australia, are infected with tuberculosis germs.

These people do not have symptoms, are not sick, and are not infectious to other people.

Without treatment, around one in 10 of those infected with the germ may develop tuberculosis disease sometime during their life.

Tuberculosis can be spread from a person or animal that has active infectious disease in their lungs to other animals or people who breathe in the germ.

Tuberculosis is cured with antibiotic treatment.

For further information on tuberculosis, please see the factsheet <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/tuberculosis.html>.