



Dr. Gary Spodnick makes a temporary muzzle for a patient at his Veterinary Specialty Hospital in Cary, where he is chief of surgery. The muzzle will prevent a jaw fracture on the dog, who recently had a mass removed from its jaw.

Jonathan Fedin

WRITTEN BY SHANNON HARTSOE

Spodnick's Anatomy

Cary vet operates on N.C. Zoo's wildest and most dangerous creatures

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE between performing surgery on a dog and performing one on an 800-pound polar bear? A dog won't usually try to kill you.

"Unlike with domestic animals," said Dr. Ryan DeVoe of the N.C. Zoo, "we can do very little intensive care and follow up without negatively impacting the patient." Occasionally that care requires the skills of a surgical specialist, and when it does, the zoo calls in Dr. Gary Spodnick, co-founder of Veterinary Specialty Hospitals of the Carolinas in Cary and its chief of surgery. "When we have a case that requires surgical intervention beyond the abilities of our staff veterinarians, we call on Dr. Spodnick," said DeVoe.

But Spodnick, a board certified surgeon, didn't always see himself as a veterinarian. In fact, this self-described "city boy" from New England didn't have much of an

interest in veterinary medicine at all until after he enrolled at Oklahoma State University. Even here, he was much more interested in plant science than in animal science. Then, while working for a veterinarian, Spodnick came up close and personal with farm animals.

"I was originally hired to do welding on the fences and that sort of thing," he recalled. "But every once in awhile I'd go out with him on a call — a pregnant cow in distress or one with milk fever. We'd get done taking care of the animal, and I'd think to myself, 'Wow, this is a cool job.'"

Spodnick switched his focus from plant science to animal science, earning his veterinary degree in 1985. He then went on to a general and specialty practice in Massachusetts and completed a surgical residency program at Tufts University,

continued on page 82

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continued from page 81

joining the faculty and staff at NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine in 1991. It was while teaching at State that Spodnick became familiar with the veterinarians at the N.C. Zoo.

Spodnick’s training and early experience is in small animal medicine, and his surgical skills began to be called upon to assist with arctic foxes and the like. “Once I started working with the zoo, they kept me coming back.” And now, Spodnick’s services have been called upon to help with many different kinds of animals, including polar bears, trumpeter hornbills, lions, warthogs and even an elephant that had broken a tusk during a routine transfer — all free of charge.

While Spodnick points out that the basic anatomy of wild animals is similar to domestic animals — an arctic fox is similar to size and makeup of a dog, for instance — that’s about where the similarities end.

“With wild animals, very often we only get one chance to do it right,” he stressed. “In our little world of domestic animal medicine, we don’t often have to deal with angry wild animals. Dogs and cats are manageable. We can control them in our ICU, and generally they’re not trying to kill you.”

Once an animal like the polar bear comes out of anesthesia, they’re back in wild animal mode groggy, in pain and generally not very happy, DeVoe agreed. “Wild animals require vastly different



Dr. Spodnick recently performed a vital pulpotomy on an elephant who had broken off one of its tusks. The elephant was injured while being transported to the N.C. Zoo from an elephant sanctuary in Arkansas. Dr. Spodnick worked with a team of vets and staff at the N.C. Zoo to clean out the dead pulp and fill it with calcium hydroxide so that the tusk wouldn't get infected and could continue to grow.

medical management plans than domestic animals, mostly due to the animals' fear of humans, aversion to restraint and in some cases, dangerous nature. ... Dr. Spodnick understands this and works with us to create treatment plans that accommodate and support patients that cannot tolerate intensive care or repeated sedation."

His favorite? The polar bear, of course. But he admits that the primates are pretty interesting as well. "They're not that far from humans as far as physical makeup," he said. "But there are some challenging differences as well." For instance, Spodnick once operated on a male gorilla that had swallowed a piece of wood. The piece had migrated through his system and ended up behind his pectoral muscles. In this case Spodnick's close relationship with the specialists at the zoo was not only a good thing — it was essential. "The chest cavity includes an air sac that allows the gorilla to sound like a bass drum when he beats on it," said Spodnick. "Without the knowledge and experience of the zoo vets, I wouldn't have known that, because that's not something I see every day."

"Before tackling a novel surgery on a particular species, we work closely with Dr. Spodnick to make sure we know all we can about the anatomy we will encounter during the procedure. Sometimes this information comes from available literature; other times we have to rely on our (or others') experience with a particular species," said DeVoe, "but even with considerable effort we are still sometimes surprised and have to adapt on the go."

It's all part of what keeps Spodnick enthralled with his "very cool" profession. "No two days, no two patients are alike," he said. "There's always something new to learn and something interesting to do." ◀

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