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E.T. WALRUS SERIOUSLY ILL AND WILL UNDERGO SURGERY AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM TODAY

TACOMA, Wash. – E.T. the walrus is seriously ill and will undergo surgery at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium this morning to drain a bacteria-laden abscess associated with his pharyngeal pouch.

The 33-year-old male Pacific walrus has not eaten for two weeks, is lethargic and has a climbing white blood count, indicating a systemic infection. He also suffers from painful osteoarthritis which has been managed with analgesics and supportive medications.

E.T.'s condition is "guarded to grave," Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium head veterinarian Dr. Karen Wolf said.

She has assembled a team of veterinary surgeons to open up the infected pouch to allow the abscess to drain. The large pharyngeal pouch is a unique feature of male walrus anatomy that is a part of the neck and communicates with the throat. It helps males float in the water and allows them to make specific sounds during the breeding season.

The abscess and associated infection pose an imminent threat to E.T.'s health, Wolf said. The condition is causing significant swelling and discomfort. His weight has dropped into the 2,750-pound range, which is significantly low for him.

"Despite various courses of antibiotic treatments, E.T.'s white blood cell count remains high and the infection has not improved," Wolf said.

The veterinary team's surgical and treatment plan includes opening up and draining the abscess, providing intravenous antibiotics and supportive medications.

Because of the severity of ET's infection and the complex anatomy involved, Dr. Wolf describes the surgery as challenging but adds that it will provide the best opportunity to remove the source of the infection.

He will remain off exhibit during this course of treatment.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).