

A Doc on the Wild Side

By Michelle Brubaker | April 22, 2014

It was a regular day in the Level III neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) at UC San Diego Health when Dawn Reeves, MD, neonatologist, received a call about a new patient. A baby was going to be delivered via emergency caesarian section after her mother experienced prolonged labor. The baby would need critical care right after delivery and Reeves' assistance was needed. The scenario is one that the neonatologist has extensive training in, but this baby was unique. In fact, she was a completely different species.

"I was the lucky person to receive the call to help with the neonatal resuscitation following what was expected to be a difficult delivery," said Reeves.

Due to the long, complicated birth, the baby ape, not yet officially named, faced multiple respiratory issues in the days following delivery. These included a collapsed lung, congenital pneumonia and difficulty with oxygenation. It took a team of vets, animal care specialists and experts from UC San Diego Health and Arkansas Children's Hospital to work together to provide the treatment needed to give this baby the best chance at a good outcome.



Dr. Reeves with the newborn gorilla.

"We were able to assist the zoo staff with the specialty care we provide human babies on a daily basis. The physiology of the gorilla is similar to that of human babies. However, anatomical differences, such as the shape of the baby gorilla's face, have to be considered. We had to use bag mask ventilation differently than we would at a typical delivery," said Reeves. "The baby gorilla also had a much stronger grip than human babies, so I needed to take that into consideration when doing procedures or exams."

Reeves added that the baby gorilla was calmed with cuddling, preferred clutching a stuffed animal, which simulated holding on to her mother, and, like normal newborns, slept a lot after birth.

The collaborative team effort also included some of the dedicated UC San Diego NICU and burn unit nurses who worked day and night shifts to care for the baby in critical condition. Around-the-clock care was provided for nearly two weeks from all involved.

“It was wonderful to see two different fields of medicine coming together to save the life of a patient. The San Diego Zoo Safari Park staff and our team were learning from each other. It makes you appreciate how physiology and the art of medicine can translate over a variety of species,” said Reeves.

Anesthesiologists at UC San Diego actually have a history of helping to care for animals in need at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, and it is the second generation of this primate family they have helped. The team treated the baby gorilla’s mother, Imani, 18 years ago when she was born prematurely and needed intensive care.

Other UC San Diego Health experts have also assisted in the medical care of different species in cases, such as the removal of kidney stones from a dolphin and the removal of a tumor from a monkey several years ago.

Reeves added, that, as an avid animal lover, working with the baby gorilla has been an amazing experience and a highlight of her professional career.



“I am very proud to have been part of this surreal experience,” said Reeves. “I have formed a special bond with ‘Baby G’ and can’t wait to see her interact with her siblings in the troop and grow into a healthy adult.”

The adorable ape was Imani’s first baby, the 17th gorilla to be born at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park and the first ape in the county to be born via caesarian section. Caretakers successfully reintroduced mother and daughter after 12 days of medical treatment and both are doing remarkably well.

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