

Treating Endangered Parrot Presents Unique Opportunity For Oncology Center Staff

Medical professionals adapt treatment style for Elvis' radiation therapy

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White-coated medical professionals, cutting-edge machines and determined patients are expected sites at a cancer treatment center. A flash of green feathers entering a CT scan, however, would make people turn their heads.

At the Texas Oncology center in Brownsville, this green plumage belongs to a unique patient: Elvis the thick-billed parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*). The endangered parrot resides at the Brownsville's Gladys Porter Zoo. After the zoo's veterinarians found a malignant melanoma on Elvis' beak, they began speaking with the oncology center about how to help the parrot.

"We did a course of 20 radiation treatments over the course of a month," said Amanda Guthrie, DVM, the zoo's associate veterinarian. "In the brief research I've done, I don't think anyone's ever tried anything like this on a bird."

However, according to Letty Martinez-Roerig, a board member of the zoo and the practice administrator for Brownsville's Texas Oncology center, the zoo did bring one of its birds in for radiation treatment about seven years ago. Still, a bird in an oncology center remains a unique sight.

Endangered Parrot Soldiers Through Cancer Treatments

Elvis completes first round of radiation therapy for melanoma. [More>>](#)For Aaron Armstrong, a senior radiation therapist at the center who performed treatment on Elvis, working on an animal was a new experience. Armstrong said his former workplace might have done therapy on dogs and cats, but not birds.

"The main thing was we had to sedate him so that he would lay still for us," Armstrong said about the difference in treating a bird as opposed to a person.

During each treatment, Armstrong, his assistant and one of the zoo's two veterinarians would tape Elvis to a Styrofoam block so the bird would stay still. They added another Styrofoam block for Elvis to rest his head on.

Armstrong and his team also had to coordinate Elvis' dosage with the amount of radiation treatment his body could handle.

"They had to lower the dosage substantially," Martinez-Roerig said, adding that each radiation dosage, or fraction, only lasted about three seconds. "The fractions have to be just minimal amounts."

Elvis has completed treatment for the time being and is now taking a couple medicines while the veterinarians figure out the next step to take. A visit to the oncologist on July 9, 2008, showed Elvis' tumor hadn't changed in sized, Guthrie said.

Regardless of whether or not Elvis goes through the doors of the oncology center again, the experience helping a parrot was positive for the staff.

"We enjoyed our time with the veterinarians at the zoo, and everything went really well with his treatment," Armstrong said.