

# Expanded hospital opens at Calif. aquarium

May 21 2010, By SUE MANNING , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- They don't cry, cough or run a fever, so how can you tell when a fish is sick?

You watch them, because you have to find them before you can fix them, explained Aquarium of the Pacific veterinarian Lance Adams, who is also known as a "wet vet" or "aqua doc."

Adams heads a team of about 50 aviculturists, mammalogists and aquarists who care for 11,000 fish, birds, mammals, reptile at the aquarium, located about 25 miles south of Los Angeles.

The smallest of the animals, like baby sea horses, can weigh less than a gram, while the largest, like the California sea lion, can weigh more than 550 pounds.

The Molina Animal Care Center, a \$5.5 million expansion that gives the aquarium a 14,000 square-foot hospital, and will give the staff new space, new technology and a new audience.

The center will be one of only a few aquarium hospitals in the country where visitors can watch as animals are examined and treated, and it may be the only one that allows people to watch surgeries as they are performed, said Steve Feldman, a spokesman for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, based in Maryland.

The aquarium is also opening a remodeled sea otter habitat, named after the oil giant BP, which donated \$1 million for its development four years

ago. The oil spill in the [Gulf of Mexico](#) dimmed the park's salute to the new otter home, but aquarium executives said the company's name would not be stripped from the attraction.

This summer, a live feed will be hooked up and aquarium surgeries will be broadcast to the local children's hospital so patients and their parents can watch. The idea is to let kids know they are not alone and give them a chance to ask Adams questions about the surgeries.

"It is truly state-of-the-art in terms of the equipment and facilities, but as importantly, it allows visitors and kids and even the hospital to really learn something about how we care for these creatures and it does it through a number of innovative methods. The openness and the transparency is a really unique feature of this facility," Feldman said.

Not every surgery will be successful. "Because they are wild and we are restraining the animals, there is always a chance something could go wrong," Adams said. "The animal could get overstressed and die. We do what we can to prevent it but if something happens we just have to explain it to the kids."

Beyond the surgeries for sick animals, there will be the cosmetic surgeries, Adams said.

If a [sea lion](#) breaks a tooth, a sawfish loses its rostrum or a shark's eye is gouged out, cosmetic surgery is needed to return the animal to its exhibit at the aquarium, Adams said. "We try to maintain the normal appearance of the animals."

They don't do elective surgeries like enhancements or facelifts. And they've never done a transplant or installed a pacemaker at the aquarium, although "it's only a matter of time until a case comes up."

Caretakers work to prevent problems, constantly monitoring environments, water quality and food. And always watching the animals.

Some of the things they look for in fish:

- If a fish gets itchy, it will start scratching by rubbing against things like rocks. It probably has an external parasite that lives on the skin, he said.
- Fish putting on weight. The biologists might switch diets or change the number of times some fish are fed. But there is a limit, Adams said, "because you feed to the weakest or most sensitive" fish in a tank.
- Aging fish can have problems like renal failure, respiratory problems, thickening tissue and decreased activity.
- Fish breath can tell caretakers a lot. Some halitosis is normal in aquatic animals because they eat raw fish so have bacteria in their mouths. But if it's caused by a tooth abscess or pneumonia, the smell turns bad or rotten and alerts the biologists that something is wrong.

Adams visits a lot of schools and a lot of students visit the aquarium. How to identify a sick animal is the most often asked question.

"They want to know if I get grossed out by the blood, don't I think it is disgusting," Adams said.

They ask what happens when the animals die, if the others eat them, if they are buried. He tells them dead [fish](#) are removed from the tank, refrigerated until a necropsy can be done, then frozen and turned over to a rendering service. "We don't refeed any of the animals."

Adams usually gets a personal question too, about part of a finger he's missing on his left hand. "Was it bitten off by a shark?" they want to

know.

"No," he tells them, but he's never sure they believe him.

**More information:** Aquarium of the Pacific - <http://www.aquariumofpacific.org>  
Association of Zoos and Aquariums - <http://www.aza.org>

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