

Top medic operates on New Zealand's 'lost' penguin

June 27 2011, by Neil Sands



A medical team readies the operation room in preparation for surgery on an ailing Emperor penguin at the Wellington Zoo, on June 27. More used to dealing with sick humans than poorly penguins, surgeon John Wyeth performed a delicate two-hour operation on the bird, nicknamed "Happy Feet", which has suffered declining health since it appeared last week.

One of New Zealand's top surgeons was enlisted to operate on an ailing Emperor penguin found on a beach near Wellington, some 3,000 kilometres (1,900 miles) from its Antarctic home.

More used to dealing with sick humans than poorly penguins, surgeon John Wyeth on Monday performed a delicate two-hour operation on the bird, nicknamed "Happy Feet", which has suffered declining health since it appeared last week.

Assisted by a six-person medical team, Wyeth performed an [endoscopy](#) to remove twigs, stones and sand which had been clogging the penguin's gut, feeding a tiny camera down its throat then looping a line around the debris.

"It (was) a memorable experience," said Wyeth, the head of gastroenterology at Wellington Hospital and a past president of the New Zealand Society of [Gastroenterology](#).

"I wasn't familiar with the anatomy... if I did a similar procedure in a human it would take me 10 minutes."

Only the second Emperor penguin ever recorded in New Zealand, Happy Feet was taken to Wellington Zoo last Friday after it began eating sand in a bid to cool down. Emperor penguins in the Antarctic eat snow when they get too hot.



A medical team readies the operation room in preparation for surgery on an ailing Emperor penguin at the Wellington Zoo, on June 27. The penguin was underweight following its long swim north and intestinal trauma, meaning it was not yet ready to be released into the wild.

The zoo's veterinary manager Lisa Argilla said the penguin, thought to be a young male, appeared to have come through the surgery intact, although she added: "He's still not out of the woods."

She said the bird, which is used sub-zero climes, was being kept in an air conditioned room carpeted with crushed ice to cool it in the relative warmth of New Zealand, where temperatures are currently around 10 degrees Celsius (50 Fahrenheit).

Wildlife experts have ruled out flying the penguin back to Antarctica as the frozen continent is in the midst of winter and engulfed by 24-hour darkness.

Argilla said that if it could be nursed back to health, the best option may be releasing Happy Feet into sub-Antarctic waters south of New Zealand in the hope that it will swim home.

But she said the penguin was underweight following its long swim north and intestinal trauma, meaning it was not yet ready to be released into the wild.

"It's hard to say how long it would take, but it would probably be a few months," she told reporters.

Agilla said staff at the zoo had become attached to the bird and were heartened by the level of international interest in its fate.

"It's really awesome to see that we've pretty much got the world behind us -- a little bit of pressure but we're doing our best," she said.

Wyeth, who volunteered to operate on the penguin after learning about its plight, rejected suggestions that if it could not survive in New Zealand then nature should be left to take its course.

"I think the important thing in this world is humanity and caring, and if we don't show that, it doesn't reflect very well on our society," he said.

The [Emperor penguin](#) is the largest species of the distinctive waddling creature and can grow up to 1.15 metres (3ft 9in) tall.

The reason for Happy Feet's appearance in New Zealand remains a mystery, although experts say Emperor penguins take to the open sea

during the Antarctic summer and this one may have simply wandered further than most.

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