Baby gorilla born after rare caesarean section

February 23 2016

Professor David Cahill and team performing the procedure on Kera. Credit: Nicolette Hayward

A baby Western lowland gorilla has been born at Bristol Zoo Gardens after an emergency caesarean procedure by University of Bristol academic, David Cahill, Professor in Reproductive Medicine and Medical Education.

The 11-day-old infant, a girl, was delivered after the mother, Kera, showed symptoms of potentially life-threatening pre-eclampsia. The

baby is yet to be named and was born weighing just over a kilo (2lbs 10oz).

She needed help from vets before she was able to breathe independently, but is now doing well, being hand-reared round the clock by a small team of experienced gorilla keepers. Kera is recovering and is being monitored closely by keepers and the Zoo's in-house veterinary team.

It is the first time a gorilla has been born by caesarean at Bristol Zoo, and one of only a handful of instances of it occurring worldwide. It is still very early days and the baby is not yet on show to the public.

Senior curator of animals, John Partridge, explained the significance of the event: "The birth of any gorilla is a rare and exciting event; but the birth of a baby gorilla by caesarean section is even more unusual. It wasn't a decision that we took lightly – Kera was becoming quite poorly and we needed to act fast in order to give the best possible treatment to mother and baby, and to avoid the possibility of losing the baby."

After being assessed by Bristol Zoo's team of in-house vets, expert treatment was provided by David Cahill, Professor in Reproductive Medicine and Medical Education at the University of Bristol's School of Clinical Sciences and gynaecologist in St Michael's Hospital.

Despite having delivered hundreds of babies by caesarean in his career, this was the first time Professor Cahill had delivered a baby gorilla by this procedure. He explained: "Having been involved with the care of these gorillas over the years, with some trepidation and excitement, we were invited to the Zoo to assess the well-being of Kera, because she was in late pregnancy and showed some signs of being unwell.

"Following our assessment, we considered that Kera might have a condition that humans get (pre-eclampsia) and that the only way to treat

it was by delivery. We also thought that the baby in her uterus was showing signs of being very unwell and in need of delivery. My colleague from St Michael's hospital, Dr Aamna Ali, and I prepared for this extraordinary caesarean section, and delivered a little girl gorilla."

He added: "Along with having my own children, this is probably one of the biggest achievements of my life and something I will certainly never forget. I have since been back to visit Kera and the baby gorilla, it was wonderful to see them both doing so well."

Bristol Zoo staff vet, Rowena Killick, assisted with the procedure and the immediate treatment of the baby, including performing mouth-to-mouth. She said: "This was a very delicate operation and we are immensely grateful for the expert help we received which meant we were able to give care at the very highest level. The baby needed some intensive care immediately after birth and it is still very early days, but we are cautiously optimistic and will be keeping a very close eye on both her and Kera."

Curator of mammals, Lynsey Bugg, is one of a small team of keepers providing round the clock care for the infant. She said: "The first few days were critical for the baby, it was vital that she was kept warm and began taking small amounts of formula milk. We started 'skin-to-skin' contact - a process used with human newborn babies – and she responded well to this and is getting stronger and more alert each day."

Provided by University of Bristol