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Community News

What It Was Like To Meet Medical Needs of 'Mr. Popper's Penguins'

by Brooklyn Eagle (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 06-16-2011

Birds Had Special Refrigerated Environment at Steiner Studios

BROOKLYN — Central Veterinary Associates, located in Valley Stream, Long Island, recently completed caring for a group of penguins that were used in the making of Jim Carrey's latest film Mr. Popper's Penguins, which is scheduled to be released tomorrow.

The penguins were cared for by Dr. Ernest Vine, practitioner of veterinary medicine; Dr. John Charos, director of avian and exotic medicine; and Dr. Laura Gorman, associate doctor of veterinary medicine, during the five months of filming.

They were responsible for checking the penguins' health status and preparing them for the transition to a saltwater environment.

These penguins were born in a zoo in Canada and were handpicked for the film. They were sent to Steiner Studios in Brooklyn under strict supervision from a penguin specialist. To ensure the penguins' health for travel, the movie studio also required international health certificates from Dr. Vine.

At the movie studio at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the penguins had a specially refrigerated environment designed and built for their health and well being, including a custom-built cold-water Jacuzzi. To prepare them for their new home, Dr. Charos added incremental amounts of salt water to their diet. This addition of salinity, called weaning, allowed the vestigial supraorbital glands — the glands that allow the penguins to live in and drink salt water and to remove the salt from the water — to fully develop again.

"These unique glands allow the penguins to live without a freshwater source," Dr. Charos said. "Since they were born in a zoo and their 12 generations before them lived in a freshwater environment, these glands begin to atrophy, like a muscle



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would from disuse. The weaning helped the vestigial supraorbital glands develop into fully functional glands again.”

Upon the completion of filming, the penguins were brought to a facility in Hong Kong that was built specifically for them. They will stay there until a new facility in China is completed. During filming, Dr. Charos and Dr. Gorman performed monthly checkups and blood work and tested them for West Nile virus and avian influenza. The penguins were also checked for aspergillosis, a group of illnesses caused by mold, and bumblefoot, a bacterial infection mostly found on the feet of birds.

“It was a tremendous experience taking care of these wonderful exotic animals,” Dr. Charos said. “Taking care of the penguins during the making of the film was very challenging. But it was also rewarding to provide these animals with the best care possible in the short amount of time we were with them.”

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One of the penguins enjoys a meal. Dr. Charos added gradual amounts of salt water to the penguins' diets so their vestigial supraorbital glands can fully develop again.

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