

<http://www.sacurrent.com/blog/queblog.asp?perm=69907>

The WAO Files

By Enrique Lopetegui
elopetegui@sacurrent.com

Update from 8/27/09: It's 1:22 pm, and Turton hasn't called yet.

Update from 8/26/09: Turton just called me and said "I'm not trying to avoid you. I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow and afterwards I'll call you between 11 am and noon" to arrange for me to see the files.

As previously reported in this blog, San Antonio's Wild Animal Orphanage held a press conference on Aug. 20 to respond to accusations from the San Antonio Lightning (whose owner [was recently sued](#) by WAO) and to give details concerning the death of Vi-Vi, a tiger who died in captivity at the orphanage.

Instead, the press conference quickly turned into an exchange between Channel 12 producer Shari St. Clair and Dr. Loretta Ehrlund, who had given Vi-Vi a clean bill of health in March.

Mostly reading from a paper, Dr. Ehrlund explained how Vi-Vi, who arrived from the Rio Grande Valley when she was "three to four months old," hadn't been eating for several weeks and, according to the USDA report, had been living in inadequate conditions. Dr. Ehrlund said she saw Vi-Vi for the first time on February 25, 2009.

"At that time she was playful, alive, alert, with no obvious signs of infectious or respiratory disease," the doctor said, adding that "she was in fair health at that time."

However, things changed in March, when she saw Vi-Vi again.

"She wasn't eating as much as she should, and the total number of red blood cells were not as high as they should be," Dr. Ehrlund said. "She was anemic, no specific disease, but she wasn't well. The end of the long bones were thickened, and this is often associated with growing animals."

The doctor explained that, while Vi-Vi was eating "most of the time," her condition was unpredictable.

"As the year went on it was reported that she was a little dizzy and then she would get better. And then she didn't. At that point we thought we had some sort of encephalitis going on, but five weeks later we treated her with what we could treat her. The attacks became worse, and one day she just got a seizure. Carol [Asvestas, WAO's director] called me and, when we were preparing to come up, [Vi-Vi] passed away."

The doctor said that what caused Vi-Vi's seizure were the lesions found in the brain by the diagnostic lab.

“Those lesions are normal in a young growing animal without enough vitamin A. We didn't have a chance to be here long enough to change that. And that's been documented in lions before. I couldn't find that same documentation in tigers, but I think you can probably extrapolate to the same thing.

“We took her body to Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory to have them do a complete and full necropsy on her to find out the cause of death, and that's where we are.”

At that point, Channel 12's St. Clair, who arrived five minutes late, started bombarding doctor Ehrlund with questions.

“Did you take the whole body?,” the producer asked.

“Ain't that what I said?” said the doctor. “We took the whole tiger.”

The doctor basically had to repeat the whole story, but the producer kept asking questions (the right ones) and going to the jugular, but stopping the flow of the press conference.

“Why don't you save the questions for the end?” I asked. “This is a press conference, not an interview with Channel 12,” to which she complained about her “not being able to ask questions.”

The back-and-forth, Dr.-producer exchange went on for about 10 minutes, with the doctor giving vague answers (“No, I can't recall from the top of my head how many animals have died”) and trying her best to be polite to St. Clair, but her piercing gaze was eloquent: she wanted her to shut her trap.

“If you continue this mode of questioning, you're going to be asked to leave,” Eric Turton, attorney for WAO, told St. Clair.

“This isn't an argument, dear,” the doctor told St. Clair.

“I'm not going to allow this to deteriorate into a town hall,” said Turton.

The press conference was pretty much over, so St. Clair asked a few more questions and left.

So did Dr. Ehrlund, before I could ask her details of the necropsy report, which is extremely technical and demands in-depth study. WAO didn't provide any documents at the press conference, citing the fact that “we're still in litigation” with the Lightning's R.G. Griffing.

After the press conference, I asked Turton how he expected me to believe that media inquiries concerning how many animals have died at the sanctuary came as “a surprise” for WAO, when allegations to that point were the very substance of the complaints against them. WAO’s inability to provide detailed records only strengthens the critic’s accusations.

While Carol Asvestas, WAO’s director, said at the press conference that “four cougars died,” according to the *San Antonio Lightning* on 12/12/08 there were 29 tigers and 14 adult mountain lions, and as of 7/1/09 there were 25 tigers and six adult mountain lions.

“If the unaccounted-for animals didn't die, then where *are* they?” asked the *Lightning*.

“Really, we thought the questions would be centered about Vi-Vi,” Turton told the *Current*, minutes before Asvestas opened a drawer full of hanging folders with the animals’ death reports for the last two years.

“Everything is here,” she said. “We have nothing to hide.”

But when I asked to examine the files, she said I’d need to consult with her lawyer. “If it’s OK with him, it’s OK with me.”

“I don’t mind that you look at them, but I’d like to be here when you do,” Turton told me, “and we need to make an appointment.”

Turton explained he’d be having surgery on Monday, but that I should call on Tuesday (Aug. 25) and, if he’s at the office, we’ll meet at WAO “Tuesday or Wednesday.”

As agreed, on Tuesday the *Current* left a message for Turton, who still hasn’t replied. I called Asvestas, and she asked me to postpone the meeting for next week, because Turton “needs a few days” to recover from surgery.

“Leave him another message,” she said. “Say you spoke to me and [ask him] what day next week is good to meet.”

Done.

Posted by Kamikaze108 on 8/25/2009 6:20:33 PM