

TEXAS SUNSET COMMISSION
State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners

Testimony by

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Mr. Chairman, members of the commission, I am Dr. Joe Flanagan, senior veterinarian at the Houston Zoo where I have provided care to the zoo's animal collection for nearly 34 years.

I am here today to respectfully request the Sunset Commission recommend that the Veterinary Licensing Act be clarified to ensure that veterinarians working for zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) can enlist the assistance of human health care providers to provide advanced care for great apes and other zoo animals.

The Houston Zoo is one of 16 facilities in the State of Texas that is accredited by the AZA. The zoo employs 4 full time zoo veterinarians. In addition to their Texas License, my 3 associates are board certified by the American College of Zoological Medicine. Together we provide health care to the Houston Zoo's collection of almost 6,000 animals representing over 900 species. As a team, we pride ourselves on the level of care we provide on a day to day basis to all the zoo's animals. In Houston, we have the luxury of easy access to veterinary specialists who can help us with advanced care when we identify a problem beyond our diagnostic or therapeutic skills and equipment. We frequently enlist help from our colleagues in private practice and at Texas A&M and enjoy collaborating on cases to solve unique medical problems.

In some cases, our veterinary specialists are not able to help, most particularly with respect to cardiology, obstetrics/gynecology, and other care for non-human primates. For example, in recent years, zoo veterinarians have identified heart disease as a leading cause of death in captive great apes, especially gorillas. Zoo veterinarians around the country are working with MD cardiologists to evaluate great apes using their skill set based on human cardiac anatomy and diagnostic techniques. This information is then shared and analyzed as part of "The Great Ape Heart Project". This invaluable collaboration between veterinarians and human medical professionals has helped identify animals that can benefit from early intervention and disease management, resulting in longer, and higher quality of life in those individuals.

Another specific case involved "Lulu" a chimpanzee with adenomyosis. Hysterectomy would have been curative and something we could have done on our own, but the animal is potentially genetically valuable so we hoped to retain her potential to produce offspring. Consultation with a human obstetrics/gynecology specialist gave us a treatment option which is commonly used in women with similar disease process, thus reducing Lulu's pain and keeping her reproductive future open.

Lastly, collaboration between veterinary and human medical professionals is improving health care for captive animals as well as preserving their counterparts in the wild. Our elephant herd has experienced mortality due to a type of herpesvirus unique to this species, but not unique to

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Houston. The virus affects young elephants world-wide. For the past 10 years, we have allied ourselves with physicians, virologists, and other veterinarians working to solve this problem. We have worked with a team of physicians and virologists and have developed a rapid diagnostic test which is currently the "gold standard". We have developed therapy protocols used successfully here and which have been used to treat elephants in their native lands. Prior to this collaboration, most elephants found with this disease had fatal outcomes.

I strongly believe that animal health care should be provided by veterinarians. I work hard to provide the highest quality of care for my patients. At times, I feel I can provide better care when I get assistance from a specialist either in veterinary medicine or from the human health care field. I don't want to put those specialists at risk when they donate their knowledge, skills, and time to improve the quality of life for our animals. I would like the Veterinary Practice Act to clearly allow that human health care professionals can assist with the care of zoo animals under the direct supervision of a veterinarian working for a zoo accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. As the director of my patient's care, I want to do whatever is possible to improve health and welfare using all the tools available.

I appreciate the honor of appearing before you today, and would be happy to answer any questions.