

December 14, 2015

Julie Morita, M.D.  
 Commissioner  
 Chicago Department of Public Health

Via e-mail: [julie.morita@cityofchicago.org](mailto:julie.morita@cityofchicago.org)

Dear Dr. Morita,

I am writing with regard to recent news stories [reporting](#) that a worker with the Red Unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (Ringling) was placed under observation for tuberculosis (TB) in Chicago and that two other workers were barred from performing after testing positive for possible TB in Indianapolis. I want to provide you with some information about Ringling's history of exposing workers, spectators, and elephants to TB and to encourage your agency to bar the circus from bringing elephants to town in the future.

The elephants traveling with Ringling may have exposed these workers to TB. An [estimated 18 percent](#) of Asian elephants in the U.S. harbor *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, and [studies](#) suggest that people who work closely with elephants are at an [increased risk](#) of exposure to the disease. For example, TB carried by an elephant was recently [linked](#) to an outbreak among nine humans in Tennessee, some of whom had had no direct contact with the animal.

[Ringling's history of TB among elephants and workers is extensive.](#) For example, in 2014, an elephant named Banko performed with Ringling for at least *two months* while she had [active TB](#). She had been exposed to the disease the previous year by the elephant [Asia, who tested positive](#) on tour. Even though there's no reliable method to verify whether elephants have been "cured" of TB, Asia was back on the road in 2015 and was touring with Ringling's Red Unit at the time the three workers were quarantined for the disease.

Moreover, in [2000](#), a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) investigator was assigned to investigate allegations that Ringling was hiding the full extent of TB infection, but company attorneys refused to turn over the medical records. [An informant told the USDA](#) "that he personally knew that the circus hired a private physician to test employees" for TB "without reporting any positive results to the health authorities" and that "some employees did," in fact, "test positive." A whistleblower who came forward in 2009 also [reported](#) that he was diagnosed with active TB about a month or two after working in Ringling's Blue Unit and was hospitalized, quarantined, and treated. He further stated that the health department at the time had the entire Blue Unit tested and that two others tested positive for active TB and a third person tested positive for exposure.

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The USDA recently announced that it [strongly encourages](#) exhibitors to adhere to the U.S. Animal Health Association's 2010 [Guidelines for the Control of Tuberculosis in Elephants](#). These standards aim to protect human and animal health by requiring serological testing—and restricting the travel of elephants with reactive test results—because these tests show whether an animal is highly likely to be carrying TB and may develop an active infection at any time. Ringling, for example, had [29 elephants test reactive to TB](#) in serological tests in 2011, including the elephants Asia and Banko, who developed active TB while on tour.

It's no surprise, given these results, that the circus has led a vigorous campaign against the USDA's adoption of serological testing standards. Indeed, *all* elephant TB testing is now entirely voluntary. In each city, Ringling trots out documents showing that elephants have tested negative on trunk wash cultures for TB. Although trunk washes are the only way to determine whether an animal is actively shedding the disease, only a *positive* result is of any diagnostic value. *Negative* trunk-wash cultures are considered "[non-diagnostic](#)," meaning that they are not proof that an elephant is TB-free.

**Because there is no federal regulation of TB in elephants, the responsibility to prevent the spread of the disease rests solely with state and local officials like you.** Given Ringling's extensive history of TB, please protect workers, families, and animals alike by barring the elephants from performing in your locality. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Very truly yours,



Rachel Mathews

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