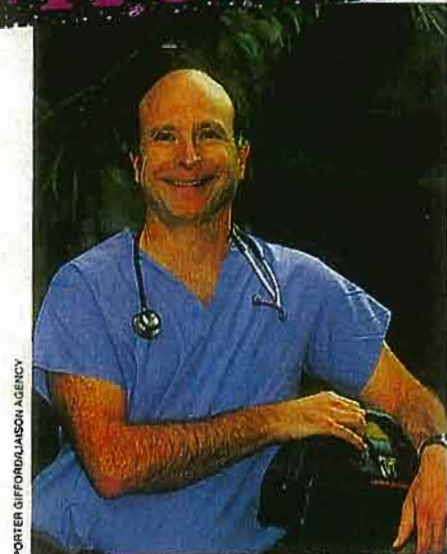


IT'S A GIRL!



PORTER GIFFORD/ALISON AGENCY

Seibel sees his primate patients gratis.

**W**earing a surgical mask and a hospital scrub top, Dr. Machel Seibel cautiously approaches his patient—a 230-lb., 27-year-old female unconscious on a gurney, surrounded by high-tech equipment. “Temperature 100.0 degrees, heart rate 78,” calls an attendant. It could be a scene from *ER*, except that the patient is merely a potential mother undergoing a routine ultrasound as part of an annual exam. And she’s a gorilla.

For nearly five years, Seibel, 50, a leading reproductive endocrinologist who is an expert in human infertility treatment, has been treating primates at Boston’s Franklin Park Zoo. There he does everything from freezing gorilla sperm to treating hormone imbalances in mandrills. “Traditionally scientists work on animals to learn about people,” says Seibel. “I thought for once human experience might be useful to animals.”

Indeed it has been, says Dr. Hayley Weston, the zoo’s chief veterinarian, who first called on Seibel to help with reproductive problems in gorillas, an endangered species whose survival may one day depend on the fewer than 1,000 now in captivity. “We’re primates too,” says Weston. “So he is pretty well versed in primate reproduction.”

Seibel has ministered to some 20 animal patients, performing sonograms on marmosets and pottos

# Doctor Zoo

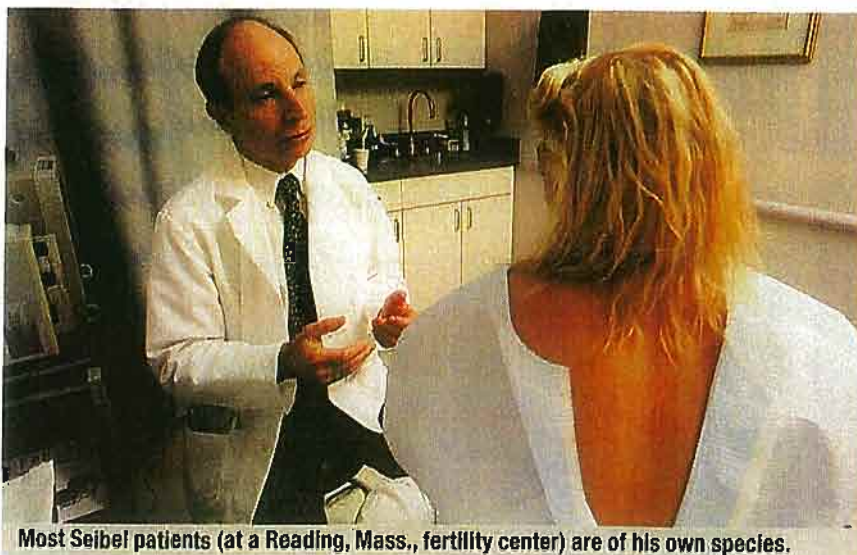
Machelle Seibel’s gorilla-side manner? Treat, then flee



DAVID RYAN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Seibel was on call in 1989, when Franklin Park Zoo’s Kiki delivered Kira (at 5 months).





Most Seibel patients (at a Reading, Mass., fertility center) are of his own species.

(slothlike African primates) as well as administering annual reproductive physicals to some of Franklin Park's six gorillas. He once ordered birth-control pills for a mandrill suffering excessive menstrual bleeding. "I phoned in the prescription," he recalls, "and said, 'I'm calling this in

for Mandy the mandrill.' The pharmacist asked, 'What's her insurance?' I told him, 'HMO Zoo.'"

To be sure, these aren't the patients Seibel had in mind when he dreamed of becoming a doctor as a child in Texas City, Texas, where his parents ran a jewelry store. Inspired



Seibel administers an ultrasound to Mandy, a mandrill.



by a professor at the University of Texas medical school in Galveston, Seibel chose gynecology as his specialty and moved in 1979 to Boston, where he gained a reputation for his work with infertility, which resulted in Massachusetts's first test-tube baby in 1983. His work left little time for a social life, but he met his wife, Sharon, 43, a psychiatrist, in 1985, and they married a year later. (They have three children: Amy, 12, Sherry, 10, and Alex, 7.)

It was five years ago when Weston, concerned about infertility in the zoo's primates, heard about Seibel's pioneering work with humans and gave him a call. "He was a little surprised," says Weston. "It's not every day that a veterinarian calls from a zoo and says, 'Would you like to come look at our gorillas?'" At first, Sharon was concerned that the work would be too dangerous for her husband, but then the couple paid a visit to the zoo. "One of the gorillas was sitting

down, eating yogurt and watching *Wild Kingdom*," recalls Seibel. "It was like seeing a kid in front of the TV." Now the family has gotten used to the apes—and vice versa. "The kids think it's great," says Sharon. "One of their favorite outings is to the zoo."

Still, gorillas, who can weigh more than 450 lbs. (250 for females), can be dangerous and must be put under general anesthesia for every exam or procedure. Some gorillas bat away the darts—shot by blowgun and containing doses lethal to humans—and toss them back at the doctors. The anesthetic could wear off without warning, so Seibel always keeps a clear path to the cage exit. This morning, everything goes without a hitch, and the team packs up and leaves without incident. "It's always a relief," he says, "when it's done and nobody got hurt."

- Thomas Fields-Meyer
- Lisa Kay Greissinger in Boston