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## Jumbo-sized dentistry - PMB-based company creates specialised equipment to extract tusk of elephant in Polish zoo

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ANNZRA NAIDOO

A ROOT canal on an African bull elephant with a massive, badly infected tusk, a warthog horn and an elephant dentist. These were some of the elements associated with a job Pietermaritzburg company Somta Tools recently undertook. The company had been asked to help create specialised



equipment to extract the tusk of elephant Ninio, housed in the Proznan Zoo in Poland. They were called upon by world-renowned veterinary dentist Dr Gerhard Steenkamp to create custom cutting equipment to extract tusks 120 mm in diameter, a size bigger than he had extracted in the past.

Ninio's was fractured last year and had become infected. Steenkamp, who hails from Pretoria, was contacted by the Proznan Zoo to help Ninio. In November last year he went to Poland hoping to remove the tusk.

"When we, however, saw Ninio and the size of the tusk, it very soon became evident that my equipment was not going to stand the test presented here. I ended by just opening the drainage of the left tusk [the badly fractured one] and I could do a partial root canal procedure on the right tusk to save it. We then decided to go back in the spring [European] to do the final removal," said Steenkamp.

Prior to going to Poland, Steenkamp had spent months researching different companies that create custom tools, before finding Somta Tools and contacting them for help. Somta Tools rose to the challenge.

Ossie Patterson, the technical manager for Somta Tools, said: "This tusk was unusually big for Dr Steenkamp so we had to make a series of sizes. We did some research and development on the material using a warthog tusk, which is similar in composition to the elephant tusk. This gave us the geometries we required. Once the research and development was completed over a couple of months we produced the tools in about four weeks."

With the equipment he needed, Steenkamp went back to Poland to remove Ninio's tusk. The size of the tusk was not the only problem; keeping the large bull elephant anaesthetised without running into complications was a challenge. Despite doing procedures on various animals around the world, this proved to be his most challenging task.

Steenkamp said: "Removing a tusk is like removing a pipe — what gives it strength is the intactness of this pipe. After two hours the tusk fragments I had cut were already starting to move. I was so optimistic. But by three hours into the procedure I was getting a bit dejected. We had said to one another that three hours was what we knew we could safely keep Ninio under anaesthetic for."

Eventually, Steenkamp used a winch to complete the procedure. He got up to his armpits up the hollow cavity where the tusk was to remove infected pulp. "Ninio is doing very well and since he is healing so well, they have already put him in the same enclosure as the females. I feel so proud of every person that was part of this," said Steenkamp.

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