

Slinky, the boa constrictor, is six years of age and has spent his entire life in the company of his caretaker Phillip. He spends much of his time in a large cage with a big glass window in front as well as time with Phillip outside his enclosure.

Phillip reports that Slinky has had no problems until recently when he refused to eat his meal. It was his usual offering—an adult rat of average size, one of which he had been eating biweekly for the past two years. Phillip was not overly concerned at first and just waited another two weeks and again offered up the rat. Again Slinky was entirely uninterested so Phillip took a closer look. He noticed that around his mouth Slinky had developed what appeared as small black specks of debris and a slight bit of red coloration beneath the specks. Slinky was entirely resistant to any closer examination, so Phillip did the next best thing (can you see my tongue in my cheek from there) and consulted the internet.

Much to his horror and worry Phillip found lots of scary information about a vicious disease called mouth rot that seemed to fit Slinky's description. Needless to say, Phillip is very concerned and is specifically worried that he might lose his beloved companion.

Slinky may indeed have infectious stomatitis, which is often times termed mouth rot. This disease involves infection with bacteria in the oral cavity and is one of the more common types of infections we as veterinarians see in our reptile patients, especially snakes.

This disease usually starts as a result of a wound, often undetectably small in the mouth of a snake. With penetration through the protective tissue layers in the mouth, bacteria get in where they do not belong, set up shop, and start infecting away. We can also see this disease in snakes that are not provided a proper environment and as a result become stressed, which in turn lowers their immune system defense mechanisms allowing the bacteria in. As this process progresses, pus will develop in the mouth and the process becomes very painful. These patients are most often times without appetite and can become very withdrawn. Phillip's concern is warranted, for if this disease is left unchecked, it is inevitably fatal.

There is a silver lining around this dark cloud of a picture as painted by me and the internet. First, Slinky needs to visit his veterinarian. His mouth needs to be thoroughly evaluated, as does the rest of his body for that matter. Cultures for bacteria need to be taken and his mouth needs to be completely cleaned of all the built up debris from infection. Because this can be a very painful process, anesthesia can be necessary in order to accomplish these procedures. Owing to the fact that this process invariably involves bacteria, appropriate antibiotic therapy needs to be provided both by injection and by topical application. The antibiotic therapy should become specifically focused to the particular bacteria involved, and this is where the culture will come in.

With identification of the offending bacteria, testing can be done to determine ultimately what antibiotic will work best against it so that therapy will be appropriate and the proper treatment course followed.

Diseases in reptiles in general can often take a longer time to treat than do corresponding processes in mammals. This fact is because they are slower in general in

how they metabolize. Simply put, they are slower to become ill and slower to get better, however they have every ability to get better when treated appropriately.

One final concern I do have here is how Phillip's new pet rat is getting along.....