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Gregory D. Bossart, marine mammal veterinarian



ERIC HASERT/staff photographer

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# Dolphin ill raise concern

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Researchers say dolphins in the Indian River Lagoon are beginning to show a pattern of infections.  
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**Story by Dan McCue**  
*of the News staff*

**S**cientists at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution have made disturbing discoveries in two dolphins recently stranded in the Indian River Lagoon: Both had heart lesions and a meningitis-like inflammation of the brain.

"It's alarming because we're beginning to see a consistent pattern of infection," said Gregory D. Bossart, director of Marine Mammal Research and Conservation at Harbor Branch. "These findings are starting to raise a lot more questions about what's going on in the lagoon."

Bossart, a marine mammal veterinarian for 20 years before joining Harbor Branch last fall, first found a heart lesion and a heart murmur in C-6, also known as Philipe, an older male dolphin rescued in August after a shark attack.

At the time, Bossart said he had

never seen a bottlenose dolphin with a heart murmur. C-6 remains in the Seward Johnson pool at Harbor Branch, in Fort Pierce.

In the past six weeks, Harbor Branch's marine mammal hospital team has found four dead dolphins in the lagoon.

An analysis of blood and tissue samples of the first two fatalities, both adult females, revealed they too had heart lesions and advanced cases of hepatitis and meningitis, an inflammation of the covering of the brain. One also might have had a heart murmur.

Results of lab tests on samples taken from the other two dolphins, a juvenile and a newborn, are not complete.

"Leaving aside the newborn, which could have been a stillbirth, all three of these dolphins were also afflicted with very similar skin lesions," Bossart said. "The com-

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monality of these infections suggests a common cause, and that's worrisome because right now we just don't know what that is."

The scientists said they think the dolphins traveled in schools until being forced out by healthy members of their pods. "We know this because of the presence of racking, or bites from other dolphins, on their bodies," he said.

"People think of bottlenose dolphins as kind and playful, largely because of television and movies, but they can actually be quite vicious, and when one of their group becomes terribly sick, they typically beat them up until they break from the group."

Bossart thinks the skin lesions might have served as a "portal" into the dolphins' bodies for infection. He said the suspicion is the other diseases are the results of a bacterial infection or a herpes- or mosquito-born virus.

"Each time we see a dolphin now, all these questions keep arising," Bossart said. "We're trying to nail down all we can about

them. But until more research is done, all we can really do is respond to emergency calls and do the best we can for the animals."

Bossart has applied for a permit to lead a multi-agency study of the Indian River Lagoon's dolphins. The study would include capturing the animals, giving them medical exams and treatment, and then releasing them.

Bossart said he hopes to receive approval from federal regulators this summer. In the meantime, he continues to care for C-6. A team of federal and state regulators, in consultation with Harbor Branch officials, were to have made a decision on whether to release C-6 back into the lagoon by now, but a chilly December and January postponed that move.

"We're continuing to monitor his recovery and overall health — and things look promising — but no decision is going to be made until the water really begins to warm up," Bossart said. "Right now, should the decision be made to release him, it won't likely happen until March at the earliest."