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Description
Sarah the dolphin, who lives at Island Dolphin Care in the Florida Keys where she is paired with handicapped children for therapy, undergoes a life-saving surgery, usually used on humans, to help her troubled breathing.

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Therapy Dolphin Receives Life-Saving Surgery

MATT LAUER, anchor:
We’re back now at 7:49 with a groundbreaking medical procedure in Florida. Doctors their performed a breakthrough surgery on a dolphin. NBC’s Kerry Sanders is in the Florida Keys with a remarkable story. Kerry, good morning.

KERRY SANDERS, reporting:
Well, good morning, Matt. At 29 years-old Sarah the dolphin was having problems breathing, and for a dolphin that is not good news. But for Sarah, who lives here with the other dolphins at Island Dolphin Care, the question about her survival was what’s going to happen? Is she going to actually be able to breathe and continue in life? One thing they did know--it was going to limit her ability to work with disabled children. Sarah the dolphin has spent years working with children, but earlier this month all that was in jeopardy when trainers noticed Sarah couldn’t breathe. At 29 years old, the dolphin’s breathing was as labored as a human with a severe case of emphysema. Tests revealed one of Sarah’s two airways had closed off 80%. And your fear was?

DEENA HOAGLAND: What if this is something really bad.

SANDERS: Deena Hoagland runs Island Dolphin Care in the Florida Keys. Every day her team pairs Sarah with handicapped children for therapy. When Sarah started getting weaker, Deena and her trainers knew something had to be done and fast. Sarah was rushed to the hospital. At 370 pounds and nine feet long, she was sedated and given a CAT scan in a machine normally used for humans. Veterinarians and doctors who treat people with lung disease came together from across the country.

MAN: Sit her down.

SANDERS: They decided to try a technique used on humans, similar to angioplasty.

MAN: We could go in there and do what we do in people, which is put a balloon down there, inflate the balloon, open up the airway.

SANDERS: When all of the operation and everything is going on, anxious moments?

DR. MICHAEL RENNER (Marine Mammal Veterinarian): Definitely anxious. I-- I will even go so far as to say scary, because it’s never been done before.
WOMAN: Go in Sarah, go in.
SANDERS: Hours later, Sarah was back in the water breathing normally. Great news for Randy Kirsch. Almost eight years ago here on Today, Randy who was born with Down syndrome, was gaining confidence through therapy with Sarah. What do you say to Sarah?
RANDY KIRSCH: I love you.
SANDERS: Now the two are back together celebrating Sarah’s new lease on life. What do you say to Sarah now that she’s all better?
KIRSCH: She’s the greatest dolphin.
SANDERS: The best dolphin in the world?
KIRSCH: Yeah.
SANDERS: I’m sure that nobody would disagree with Randy. And Sarah, of course, loves it. Back to you guys, Matt.
GUTHRIE: All right.
LAUER: She looks good. Kerry, thank you very much.