

Remember Jerom

February 13, 2006

Ten years ago I quit working at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta when a teenage research chimpanzee I cared for was euthanized. Jerom was almost 14 years old, and had been experimentally infected with several different strains of HIV beginning at the age of two. His early childhood was spent living with another chimpanzee named Roberta, in a tiny cage in a cinderblock building.

When I began caring for Jerom in 1995, he had been isolated from his two cage mates for a month because he'd gotten so ill. He looked like an AIDS patient before the age of protease inhibitors – so wasted he looked like a skeleton, and so weak he could barely hold his head up. On more than one occasion, I saw him cry. I never knew if it was because of the fear, the pain, or the loneliness. After watching him suffer through the illness for at least a year, the researchers ended his life and harvested his tissues for information that was meant to lead to a cure for AIDS. All they ever learned from Jerom's contribution was that HIV causes disease. I learned that chimpanzees deserve dignity and respect, not dart guns and biopsies.

Today, little has changed at the Yerkes campus by most accounts. Hundreds of monkeys and nearly a hundred chimpanzees are confined to tiny cages and subjected to all manner of biomedical and behavioral research. At least 1,300 chimpanzees are estimated to live in facilities around the country. They are used in experiments designed to study hepatitis, HIV, malaria, and a host of other human diseases. Thousands of monkeys are used to study human diseases and addictions, and test the effectiveness and safety of potential human medicines.

Many scientists have come to believe that animal-based basic and applied research are not highly predictive of human responses to disease or medicine, casting doubt on the validity of such work. The merits of the research can be debated, but what is undeniable is that all nonhuman primates suffer when they are kept behind bars, with minimal social companionship, no access to the outdoors, and almost no opportunity to exercise free will.

If the science is suspect and the suffering of the research primates outweighs the utility of the research, we then have a moral obligation to discontinue this practice. The use of primates in biomedical research should be replaced with more efficient and less destructive alternatives. It is likely that the use of nonhuman primates will continue to detract from the effort to develop those alternatives.

I drive by the place where Jerom lived and died almost every day. Cars full of commuters rush back and forth, seemingly oblivious to the suffering of so many monkeys and apes in the buildings behind the trees. Like Atlanta drivers, people around the country also seem unaware of the suffering of those who unwillingly become fodder for grant proposals and research papers. Yet research primates are individuals who matter. How we treat them says everything about us as a culture – especially now, when we are so preoccupied with the human tragedies that have unfolded this year. It is important to our moral evolution that we protect and value other beings in our care instead of exploit them for our own gain. It is too late for Jerom, and for many of the chimpanzees he shared his prison with. But a thousand others, and countless generations of future chimpanzees and monkeys need our consideration and our voices to stop this tragedy. Please remember them.

For Jerom, this year and every year, and for handsome Clint who gave his DNA,

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