

Remember Jerom February 13, 2000

On February 13, 1996, Jerom Chimpanzee died at the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center, in Atlanta. He had been experimentally infected with HIV as a two-year-old infant, lived a dark and dull life, and was the first chimpanzee to die from AIDS more than a decade later.

For six months before his death, Jerom was alone in his cage, alternately wasted and bloated, frantic and listless. He was full of fear, paranoia and frustration. In the weeks before his euthanasia, I failed in all of my attempts to make him laugh.

Nearly four years later, in November 1999, the NIH convened a workshop to determine whether or not the virus responsible for Jerom's death (a mutated strain called HIV-1jc) should be used to test potential vaccines in other chimpanzees. HIV-1jc is potentially lethal for chimpanzees (although none of the other chimps infected with this strain have shown symptoms of illness); the NIH questioned whether or not it should be used. The workshop's decision was to delay the approval of this virus' use for vaccine challenges until the most appropriate study comes along.

As Jerom's former caretaker and a current caretaker of ex-laboratory chimpanzees, the workshop raised these questions for me: Why is the issue of infecting chimps with a lethal virus being questioned now, but wasn't 15 years ago when AIDS research began? And why is that important? The answer lies in the results of twenty years of chimpanzee research.

Between the years 1978 and 1999, behavioral research has uncovered an enormous wealth of information about the mental and social lives of chimpanzees. At the time that AIDS was becoming a public health threat, behaviorists were beginning to delve deeply into the question of what it means to be a chimpanzee. In these two decades, the chimp as an emotional, self-aware, other-aware, planning, communicating, political, counting, self-medicating, tool-making, cultural animal became known to the world.

In the time that it has taken humans to see the life of the chimpanzee for the rich and complex endeavor that it is and should be, biomedical research has relegated over 200 individuals to AIDS research projects around the country. These research subjects are confined to isolated, restricted and sterile biocontainment facilities, and are often consigned to rigorous invasive protocols.

Jerom was the first of his kind to die of AIDS. It is likely that he won't be the last: HIV-1jc or its derivative was injected into three more chimpanzees at Yerkes, and a handful of others around the country. It is also very likely that the NIH will,

some day soon, be presented with a request to challenge a vaccine candidate with this virus that they won't turn down. Regardless, even if no more chimpanzees are infected with this pathogenic strain, others continue to be infected with less-virulent ones, which still require a lifetime in biocontainment enduring experimental procedures. And regardless even of that, chimpanzees continue to be poked and prodded, and their tissues used solely for the benefit of human health.

A look at the last 20 years of chimpanzee research can only conclude that the NIH questioned the use of lethal HIV in 1999 because the quality of knowledge about the chimpanzee has indicated that it is more imperative than ever that we weigh the ethics of their use.

This conclusion is important because, even though chimps are being regarded as never before (as evidenced by the NIH workshop and the 1997 ILAR report recommending sanctuary for "surplus" lab chimps), there is absolutely no indication that their use in HIV and other invasive studies is showing any sign of abating. This is because chimpanzees are, according to researchers, the best laboratory model possible for human pathogens like HIV, respiratory syncytial virus (which requires the use of infant chimps), malaria, and the Hepatitis strains.

The use of chimpanzees has provided humans with insights into many medical quandaries. Research argues that the chimpanzee model is invaluable, and that medical progress will not happen without it. However, it's obvious that human prisoners were probably the best model of all, and medical research has indeed progressed since it was determined that the use of captive humans is unethical.

The use of the chimpanzee in biomedical research reflects a denial of the social and cultural needs of the chimpanzee, and thus reflects a dismissal of the findings of the well-respected behavioral sciences. Consider the social and physical needs of chimpanzees. Consider chimpanzees as thinking, aware individuals. Consider them - on their own merits - independently of humans. Ask yourself if it does the chimpanzee any good to be kept in the confines of a laboratory and to be used for human medicine. It is within our capacity as humans to think beyond the limits of what is best for us, to ask what is best for others, independent of us. It is time that we do just that.

The government of New Zealand did when they recently took the unprecedented step of prohibiting experimentation on chimpanzees. This course of action would certainly be much more difficult in the United States, where chimpanzees are an established fixture in biomedical research. However, it is time for the biomedical and behavioral sciences to march in step, and for a century of cognitive and social science on chimpanzee subjects to at last have a real practical application and benefit to the species. While sanctuaries are a step in the right direction, ultimately they can do no good until the laboratories stop producing more chimpanzee test-tubes. It is time for biomedical research on chimpanzees to end.

Jerom's legacy lives on. The virus from his body was given to others, so that they too may die. With his death, new life was breathed into the two-decade-long dream to perfect the use of chimps for HIV vaccine studies. The reality of this vision is that Tika Chimpanzee, who likes to talk on the telephone; Manual who narcissistically loves to admire himself in a mirror; and Nathan who once charmed me with his sarcastic grin, and who was the first to take Jerom's blood, all wait at Yerkes to die in isolation. Others will follow, if not under the auspices of HIV research, than certainly as unpaid mercenaries of the next threatening health crisis.

The only way to perfect the 'chimpanzee model' is to abandon it, and give the chimps back their culture, their identity, and their lives. Please take a stand, and make your voice heard.

For Jerom, who lives in my heart, and in memory of Debbie who died in sanctuary with love, and Donna, who died in research with fear.

Rachel I Weiss