

**Remember Jerom  
February 13, 2004**

Last year, millions of dollars - public and private money - were spent on biomedical research on chimpanzees and monkeys housed in research institutions across the country. 1,300 chimps and tens of thousands of monkeys live in private and federal facilities, and are used to study all manner of naturally occurring human diseases, and pathogens likely to be used in warfare.

For twenty years, scientists have been using monkeys and apes to develop drugs and vaccines for HIV. The very first experiments on the virus entailed inoculating nonhuman primates with the tissues of infected humans. It was discovered that only the chimpanzees could be persistently infected; a large-scale breeding program designed to supply chimps for AIDS research produced most of the chimpanzees living in labs today. One chimpanzee, Jerom, was born during that time, at the Yerkes Primate Center, a federal lab in Atlanta. He was experimentally infected with three strains of the virus. To the surprise and disappointment of the researchers, the HIV infected chimps did not develop AIDS, and by the early 1990s, research using chimpanzees slowed down. Instead, researchers found ways to infect some monkey species with HIV, studied the monkey version of the virus (SIV), and created a chimera - a hybrid of the two, SHIV. It was around the time that SHIV was created that Jerom started showing symptoms of AIDS, over a decade after he was first infected.

Twenty years of research on nonhuman primates has not produced an HIV vaccine or the cure for AIDS. AZT first appeared on the market in the 1960s as an anti-cancer drug; pressure from AIDS activists in the 1990s forced the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to test the drug in human clinical trials without first being studied in animals. Although the protease inhibitors used in the cocktail were tested in animals, one manufacturer has admitted that his company's product was delayed for years because of misleading results from animal studies. The only AIDS vaccine that went to large-scale human clinical trials, AIDSVAX, was tested in only a handful of chimpanzees, and was an abysmal failure. The FDA estimates that only 5 in 5,000 compounds tested in animals reach clinical studies in humans. It's not possible to know how many of the 4,995 potential pharmaceuticals screened out by the process could have been the cure.

The biomedical industry has been developing alternatives to live animal research, but they have not yet replaced the millions of individuals like Jerom used every year. While the alternatives are being implemented chiefly because of their economic benefit, some research is changing because of the recognized ethical concerns with using especially nonhuman primates. We are moving in the right direction.

More than ever before, nonhuman interests are being recognized. Using and promoting alternatives is not only good for the research subjects, but is also good for humans. We have a responsibility to the other species around us to treat them with respect and not use them wantonly for our selfish purposes. Our moral evolution depends on the compassion we extend.

Jerom was a teenager when he died eight years ago today. He was alone and scared for many months. He was afraid of humans and he wasn't allowed contact with other chimpanzees. When he died, he hadn't seen the sun in at least six years. On the evening before he was euthanized, I gave him some donuts and a candy bar; we spent hours together, sitting and grooming. His interest in living a life free from human control was impossible to ignore, but because his interests did not rise to the level of the human interest in doing research, he was afforded only the minimal level of legal protection.

Researchers claimed that Jerom's death proved definitively that HIV causes AIDS. His short, bleak life was spent in service to humans to prove a premise that did not need proving. He was not the first, and he will not be the last. Most people can agree that there is a possibility that the use of animals as surrogates for humans in medical studies is doing some amount of damage by wasting research dollars and leading scientists down blind alleys. If that possibility exists, don't we owe it to the humans who depend on medicines to live to begin a serious, national inquiry about the efficacy of animal-based science? Caging sentient beings and performing medical experiments on them does irrevocable harm not only to the study subjects, but also to the researchers and care-givers who must develop a thick skin about the cruel work they are doing. Don't we owe it to our ideal of a fair and equitable society to find a way to continue to expand our ethical decision-making to encompass and recognize the interests of nonhumans? The time is now.

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