

# Washington National Primate Research Center: Six Decades of Broken Promises



## Summary

In 1960, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded a network of national primate research centers (NPRCs) throughout the U.S., hoping to enable scientists to replicate human diseases in nonhuman primates and develop vaccines. These facilities have not delivered on the promised vaccines or significant improvements in human health.<sup>1</sup> This failed government program has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars, led to the deaths and abuse of hundreds of thousands of primates, and repeatedly violated federal animal protection laws.<sup>2</sup> Harvard University closed its primate center in 2015 in the wake of multiple animal welfare violations and after assessing future scientific needs.<sup>3</sup> It is time to put a stop to these archaic, 20<sup>th</sup> century research practices and for the Washington National Primate Research Center (WaNPRC) at the University of Washington (UW) to close.



## Scientific Failures

Each year, the WaNPRC warehouses approximately 1,500 monkeys in barren conditions that fail to meet the basic behavioral and psychological needs of these highly intelligent, social primates.<sup>4</sup> Condemned to an existence in which they are deprived of meaningful companionship, freedom of choice, and control over their own lives, these “biomedical models” succumb to extreme psychological distress and physiological abnormalities that contribute to poor, irreproducible data and skewed experimental results.<sup>5</sup>

Despite 60 years of promises, the WaNPRC has failed to deliver effective vaccines against AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, Zika, or any other deadly diseases. The monkeys used in the WaNPRC’s neuroscience program continue to die from unintended infectious disease outbreaks that ravage these animals, who have multiple devices surgically implanted in their skulls and eyes. A recent analysis showed that the experiments conducted by WaNPRC neuroscientists are costing taxpayers more every year but having a shrinking scientific impact.

For decades, scientists have known that physiological differences between humans and other primates have frustrated attempts to apply results to humans.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, a landmark report by the National Academy of Medicine concluded that “our closest primate relative, the chimpanzee, was not needed for experimentation.”<sup>7</sup> A 2013 NIH report confirmed that “research involving chimpanzees has rarely accelerated new discoveries or the advancement of human health for infectious diseases.”<sup>8</sup> The monkeys used at all the NPRCs have not shared a common ancestor with humans for more than 22 million years. Furthermore, evidence-based assessments have demonstrated that experiments on monkeys have failed to produce advances in human medicine.<sup>9,10</sup>

Importantly, manufacturers Pfizer and Moderna have both stated that the SARS-CoV-2 virus behaves differently in monkeys than it does in humans.<sup>11</sup> In the face of the growing pandemic, both companies acknowledged that animal studies would be misleading and bypassed what is normally a years-long process of vaccine development and testing in monkeys.

## Other Failures

- **The WaNPRC is in a financial crisis.** A report required by the federal government and prepared by the National Scientific Advisory Board, which evaluates WaNPRC operations, stated, “From all appearances, the financial issues facing the WaNPRC are formidable/critical, and some may border on insurmountable.”<sup>12</sup>
- **Infectious disease outbreaks compromise research results and pose a risk of transmitting zoonotic diseases to facility staff.** The WaNPRC has failed to eradicate deadly diseases including methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA),<sup>13</sup> valley fever,<sup>14</sup> and tuberculosis.<sup>15</sup>
- **UW has repeatedly been cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for violations of the federal Animal Welfare Act.** Monkeys have died of strangulation, starvation, and dehydration, because of veterinary error, and by choking on their own vomit.<sup>16</sup> The school is currently under investigation by the USDA Investigative and Enforcement Services and the Animal Services Compliance Department of the Washington State Department of Agriculture.
- **UW’s animal experimentation oversight committee (its IACUC) is rife with conflicts of interest.** One committee member is the director of a pro-animal experimentation organization that receives significant donations from the university.<sup>17</sup>
- **Staff reductions directly affect animal welfare and research capacity.** A dramatic decrease in the number of WaNPRC core scientists has resulted in a decline in intellectual and financial resources. In one recent eight-month period, the facility treated 332 cases of trauma, 200-plus cases of gastrointestinal problems, 19 cases of rectal prolapse, and 149 cases of significant weight loss, and it had a dozen surgical implant abnormalities.<sup>18</sup> Four associate directors have been removed because of ethical and welfare concerns.
- **A UW representative claimed credit for Moderna’s vaccine.** Misstatements, inappropriate representations, and falsehoods—particularly when they occur in the context of issues as sensitive as COVID-19 vaccines—are an egregious violation of the public’s trust. During a recent public meeting, [a UW official read a prepared statement](#) announcing that experiments carried out on monkeys in the Fuller lab at the WaNPRC were directly responsible for the development of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine. That statement was false.

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## References

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