

Monkeys are not the pathway to human health



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I used to work at the University of Washington’s National Primate Research Center (WaNPRC). I have looked into the eyes of the monkeys, and I have seen what it does to their bodies to be confined for years to a metal cage that is no bigger than a kitchen cabinet. I have reviewed the veterinary and behavioral records and the necropsy reports that describe in dispassionate terms the years of confinement and experimental procedures that these monkeys undergo. I had a front-row seat to the shocking reality of the suffering that these sentient animals endured.

During the 17 years that I served as a primate scientist, a professor, and a member of the UW Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), I witnessed so many failures of science, oversight, and ethics that I finally left my position, determined to advocate for these animals.

For 60 years, WaNPRC has imported, bred, and held captive thousands of monkeys for painful and dubious experimentation that would supposedly result in vaccines for dreaded human diseases such as HIV, TB, Zika, malaria, and SARS-CoV-2. None of them ever materialized. Instead, monkeys at the primate center have died of strangulation, dehydration, choking on their own vomit, and being mauled by other stressed monkeys. Their limbs have been mangled in caging malfunctions. Workers have extracted too much blood from them, cut out pieces of them that they shouldn’t have, and given them the wrong drugs. There are instances of monkeys going missing for days. These gross violations of the Animal Welfare Act have all occurred within the last few years and, in my opinion, are directly related to documented leadership and veterinary incompetence, the failure of staff and investigators to follow protocols, inadequate staffing and training, financial mismanagement, and blatant conflicts of interest. These failures are catching up with WaNPRC, which is under investigation by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, the USDA, and its funder, the National Institutes of Health.

The welfare, veterinary, and scientific failures are heightened by the unintended infections with MRSA, valley fever, tuberculosis, Chagas disease, and enzootic simian viruses that continue to ravage these monkeys and obscure and likely confound the experimental data. UW’s IACUC is meant to serve as the last line of defense for animals in laboratories. It is supposed to ensure that laws and regulations are followed; that needless animal use, suffering, and death are prevented; and that rigorous harm-benefit analyses are conducted. These oversight committees were mandated by Congress in 1985 after PETA exposed horrors at two primate laboratories.

However, UW’s oversight committee is apparently failing to do its job properly. One possible reason for that might be the university’s cozy relationship with an organization that was set up to promote the use of animals in experiments, the Northwest Association for Biomedical Research (NWABR).

The executive director of NWABR is the community member of UW’s IACUC. UW is a “platinum donor” to NWABR, meaning that it has

given at least \$25,000. WaNPRC’s interim director is president of the NWABR board. UW’s attending veterinarian, director, and assistant director of the Office of Animal Welfare and several IACUC members also serve on the pro-animal experimentation group’s board.

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—Lisa Jones-Engel, Ph.D.

It is time for the University of Washington (UW), which runs the primate research center, to take decisive action and shut it down.

There is precedent. Harvard University axed its New England National Primate Research Center in 2013 after looking critically at its multiple animal welfare violations, leadership crises, the difficulty of keeping monkeys in laboratories, and the future of its research priorities. Now it’s UW’s turn.

The University of Washington should follow Harvard’s lead. Close the center and send the monkeys to a suitable sanctuary to live out their lives in peace.

Primatologist Lisa Jones-Engel, Ph.D., is a Fulbright scholar who has studied the human-primate interface for 35 years. Her scientific career has spanned the field, the research laboratory, and the undergraduate classroom. Dr. Jones-Engel serves as senior science adviser on primate experimentation with PETA’s Laboratory Investigations Department.