In 2014, PETA launched a campaign to end a series of maternal deprivation experiments that had been carried out at NIH for more than 30 years.

Monkeys—bred to be genetically predisposed to being more fearful, anxious and depressed than normal monkeys—were permanently removed from their mothers at birth.

They were caged alone for 22 to 24 hours daily.

The infants were used in psychological experiments where they were subjected to loud noises, mechanical snakes, and the presence of threatening humans.

Although categorized as “Column C,” suggesting no pain or distress, the monkeys suffered from severe and persistent cognitive, social, and physiological deficits.

A comprehensive review of these experiments conducted by a former NIH neuroscientist in consultation with independent medical doctors, mental health professionals, veterinarians, and primatologists, including Drs. Jane Goodall, John Gluck, and Barbara J. King, concluded that the experiments caused substantial long-term suffering to animals but had never led to treatments for human mental illness—even as superior non-animal research methods were readily available.

In 2015, NIH permanently ended the experiments.

Congressional Mandate

Chimpanzees in Research

In 2011 and 2013, reviews undertaken by the Institute of Medicine and the NIH on the scientific necessity of using chimpanzees in biomedical research revealed that:

- Ongoing research on chimpanzees is “largely unnecessary.”
- The existing oversight system had failed; and
- Laboratory conditions could not address the psychological needs of chimpanzees.

The Call from Congress

Alarmed by the apparent failure of the oversight system in the case of chimpanzees and infant monkeys:

- Members of Congress instructed NIH to review the policies and processes governing primate experiments.
- This initiative was brought by Representatives Elliot Engel, Dina Titus, Lucille Roybal-Allard, and Sam Farr.

Why an Ethics Review of Primate Experimentation?

- Research fails to translate to humans
- Evolving understanding of the complex psychological needs of primates
- Changing societal views of primate experimentation
- Availability of alternatives

On September 7, 2016, NIH hosted a workshop, the title of which—“Ensuring the Continued Responsible Oversight of Research with Non-Human Primates”—suggested a foregone conclusion.

The only “ethics” talk at the workshop was given by Ernest Prentice, a non-ethicist who took issue with the term, “harm-benefit relationships,” noting that “harm” means “hurt, injury, damage, impair, inflict wound.” Said Prentice: “I don’t think this appropriately characterizes research involving animals … I prefer the term ‘cost-benefit analysis.’”

NIH Primate Workshop

We are confident that the oversight framework that we have in place for nonhuman primates in research is robust and has provided sufficient protections for the animals. —Carrie Wolinetz, Associate Director, NIH, in her opening statement.

We don’t do experiments in monkeys. We do experiments in monkeys only when that is the only system in the absolute best system to address a critically important scientific question, relevant to human health. —Barbara J. King, in her presentation.

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Implications for Primate Use: The Failure of Neurobiology Experiments

More than 105,000 primates are currently held in U.S. laboratories, where they are used in toxicology and drug testing in which gavage tubes are forced into primates’ nostrils and throats to administer toxic substances; infectious disease studies in which primates are infected with pathogens like Ebola and Marburg; neurobiology studies in which experimenters drill holes into primates’ skulls and screw metal restraint devices into their heads, and so on. The social and psychological needs of primates are not met in the laboratory environment.

References

- "The NIH does not have a serious history of handling the ethical and policy issues pertaining to research involving animals." —Tom Beauchamp, one of the only three bioethicists who were invited to the workshop, none of whom was given a speaking slot.
- "Through mapping out the circuits of the basal ganglia (using NHPs), treatments for Parkinson’s disease (deep-brain stimulation) were developed." —Column C, suggesting no pain or distress, the monkeys suffered from severe and persistent cognitive, social, and physiological deficits. —Nonhuman primates are the best model for higher order functions of the nervous system, especially if we are seeking relevance to human experience and disease.
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