

Clash of priorities

*AIDS activists challenge animal rights activists:
Is the life of a rat equal to the life of a human being?*

by Bob Roehr

Animal rights extremists have placed the lives of animals above those of me and my friends," Jeff Getty told reporters at a June 18 news conference in Washington, D.C. The AIDS treatment activist received an experimental baboon bone marrow transplant earlier this year.

"The AIDS community has woken up and realized there can be no more silence on this issue," Getty said, "because silence equals death. And we will not go quietly to our graves."

The event was part of an unprecedented coalition of scientists and patient advocates united to denounce the animal rights movement as impeding vital, life-saving medical research. The weeklong series of education and protest activities will surround an international gathering of animal rights advocates.

"For too long, animal rights activists have tried to stand in the way of medical progress for human life," Frankie Trull had told a news conference the previous day. She heads up the Foundation for Biomedical Research. "We are united because the devastation, delay and outright intimidation that animal rights groups are imposing on crucial medical research is greater today than at any time in the history of scientific inquiry."

Mike Shriver, public policy director for the National Association of People with AIDS, represented 34 AIDS organizations which have signed a statement on the use of laboratory animals in HIV/AIDS research and treatment.

Their statement read in part, "Certainly, the members of the HIV/AIDS community support the compassionate treatment of animals. We also demand that humane care of animals be used in all research, including full enforcement of applicable federal, state and local laws. However, one fact is undeniable: The swiftest and most certain route to a cure for HIV/AIDS is intensive research—including the use of laboratory animals—and from that route we will not waver."

"We believe that animal studies are a necessary complement to clinical studies in humans. In fact, every drug presently employed to treat HIV infection and the opportunistic infections that kill most people with HIV were developed using animals. And many other compounds which seemed extremely promising in computer models and in vitro, were proved in animal models to be extremely toxic."

"For the foreseeable future, animal research is essential to progress in the study, treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS, including the development of new approaches that may ultimately lead to a cure."

ACT UP Washington's Steve Michael recalled a 1989 attack on an Arizona State University lab studying *Cryptosporidium*, a waterborne parasite deadly to people with compromised immune systems. The Animal Liberation Front destroyed the long-term research, released 1,200

rats, mice and rabbits used in the study, and burned the building to the ground.

"I can't help but think of a friend of mine, Chris Fons, from ACT UP Milwaukee, one of more than a hundred people killed by an outbreak of *Crypto* in Milwaukee."

Michael wonders if the destroyed research might have been able to prevent those deaths.

Christine Buffleben, of ACT UP Golden Gate's Breast Cancer Committee, told of her own mother's nine-year struggle with the disease. "When it metastasized to her lungs, her bones, her liver, her spleen and her bone marrow, our family did not have time to use drugs that had not already shown some indication of beneficial results.... Let's end breast cancer, AIDS and other diseases, not animal research."

Zora Kramer Brown, who founded the Breast Cancer Resource Committee in 1989, survived the disease herself. African American women have "the highest mortality, the highest rate of death" from breast cancer, she said. It has struck four generations of her family.

"No longer can we afford complacency in the patient community, among our elected officials, in the media or among researchers," said Brown. "Our combined voices to educate the American public will be heard. The stakes are much too high to be ignored and for us to be silent."

Getty dismissed the assertion by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals that most animal research can be done on computer simulations. "We do not have a computer that can possibly emulate the human immune system, the tens of billions of cells, each with 27 to 35 different reaction options that we know of, and probably a hundred more that we don't. If we had such a computer we would have already found the cure for AIDS."

"We as scientists must stand up and speak up for what we do," said spinal cord injury specialist Dr. Wise Young, a medical advisor to actor Christopher Reeve. "I do experiments on animals because I believe this is the only way to achieve advances in spinal cord injury research."

"Every time I meet somebody like Christopher Reeve, the urgency of what we have to do to get therapies for him comes through over and over again. This man cannot move. He's trapped. If we, by doing some experiments on animals, can provide him with the opportunity for a therapy, we are obligated as human beings to do this."

To Michael, PETA is "saying that a rat is as valuable as a gay man with AIDS, a poor African American woman with breast cancer...that is unacceptable. They are marginalizing the lives of a majority of people in this country and around the world."

Shriver put it succinctly, "The logical conclusion of discontinuing animal research, for me as a person with HIV disease, is death."



ACT UP's Steve Michael

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