

6 of 8 DOCUMENTS

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The Mental Health of Primates; We're Still Needlessly Cruel to Research Animals in Our Labs

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IMAGINE A small cube of a cage three feet on a side and three feet high. Within this cube lives a primate -- often a baboon or a rhesus monkey -- that could weigh as much as 55 pounds.

Baboons usually stand on all four feet, but in such a space they cannot walk anywhere. They cannot stand upright or stretch their arms in such a cage. Yet this is a common caging for the animals used for scientific and medical research in the United States today. Is this humane?

In 1985, Congress refined the **Animal Welfare Act** with the aim of improving conditions for the thousands of laboratory animals now used in the United States for experimentation and research. As part of that new law, I sponsored an amendment calling for changes in the care of primates -- chimpanzees, baboons, rhesus and other monkeys -- to enhance their "psychological well being."

I had insisted on the amendment after visiting a research facility of the National Institutes of Health's outside the Washington metropolitan area. To my shock and dismay, I found that the primates were confined in individual cages about the size of a small shower stall. These well-built steel structures were to be the "homes" of individual animals for several years. I also learned that the "minimum" cage size was commonly used in most research facilities around the country, and that only a few facilities routinely provided even limited exercise out of the cages for the animals.

Neither the researchers nor the animal caretakers viewed the cages as humane care for primates. They believed that they could provide better care and freedom for the primates if permitted to do so. They felt it would neither interfere with the projected research nor dent their budget. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has now promulgated regulations to enforce the law, but, unfortunately, has failed on two important issues: primate cage size and the exercise of dogs. We apparently have a distance to go before the intent of my amendment is fully realized. The new USDA regulations specify exactly the same cage sizes for primates that weigh up to 105 pounds: The cage must be 25.1 square feet of floor area and seven feet high. Envision a small cell 3 1/2 feet wide and eight feet long with a seven-foot ceiling and you have the picture. The smaller cages of three feet on a side are deemed suitable for primates weighing up to 55 pounds.

One of the regulations requires provision in the primate cages for "normal postural adjustment" by the animals. Apparently, NIH and USDA believe "normal" adjustments are met as long as the baboon confined in one of the three-foot cubes can stand on all four feet, turn around and sit down. But what about standing up- right, lying down stretched out or stretching their arms out to the side or overhead? Before being caged, the baboons could make all of these "postural adjustments" whenever they felt like it.

Some labs view periodic release from the small cages to larger ones for exercise as essential in caring for their primates, but unfortunately most research facilities only meet the minimum requirements, which make no special provision for exercise. In some research institutions animals live in their cages for years and are only occasionally let out. On the rare occasions when they are taken out of the cages, the animals almost always are sedated -- so exercise is out of the question.

A few hours or days for transportation purposes in such cramped quarters might be considered acceptable, but is it humane for the animals to be so confined for months, a year, 10 years?

During the five years of regulation-drafting, many research facilities were voluntarily upgraded. That is a fairly normal occurrence, so it is mystifying that USDA would leave the cage size requirements exactly where they were prior to 1985 (with the exception of primates over 105 pounds). Congressional intent on exercise for dogs is also not met in the new regulations. Christine Stevens, co-founder of the Society for Animal Protective Legislation, pursued for more than a decade a requirement that laboratory dogs be released from their cages daily for exercise. Senate Minority Leader Robert **Dole** (R-Kan.), myself and others agreed that this would be specifically required in the 1985 amendments. **Dole** stated on the Senate floor that the language meant release of the dogs from their cages.

But the new regulations require only that individually caged dogs be released. This excludes dogs that are confined two-at-a-time in a double cage system or in other groupings.

USDA officials offer as a rationale for this that dogs in double cages can exercise all the time and thus need not be released. But the regulations also set cage sizes for such widely used lab animals as beagles that exclude true exercise: Double cages for two beagles confined together need not be longer than double the length from the nose to the base of the tail, plus six inches. That is not enough room for exercise.

The USDA veterinarians add that since another regulation provides for daily cleaning of the cage, in the case of a double-size cage with two beagles, the only feasible method would be to remove the beagles to clean the cage. In other words, while the dogs are out of the cage they can exercise as they wish.

But the National Association of Biomedical Research complained that the dog exercise provision was an expensive added cost. And although it would be easy for USDA regulators to require a 15-20 minute daily exercise period out of the cage for dogs when their cages are cleaned, the voluminous document ignores the issue. There is an axiom that the best medical research is performed on normal, healthy animals and that some research results may be questionable when abnormal animals are used. Indeed, the "psychological well being" amendment has resulted in improvements and innovations at a significant number of research facilities.

Keeping a primate alone in a small cage for years degrades psychological well being, according to many primatologists, including Jane Goodall. Although some primatologists in NIH and other institutions argue that cage size is not important to psychological well being, I side with Goodall and others, who speak of the emotional distress of confined primates and identify the symptoms of those animals severely damaged.

Does a degraded psychological condition also degrade the research conducted on the animal? Generally that is a question for the medical research community to evaluate. But on the matter of humaneness, it is an easy call for me.

There is a lawsuit in federal court to address the inadequacies of the regulations. As a former legislator, I would be disappointed if the issue cannot be settled without leaving it for a court decision.

My amendment specified that steps be taken in primate care to "enrich" the animals' lives. Inordinately small cages and lack of access to exercise do not constitute life enrichment for primates, or for any animal.

University research institutions tend to brush off criticism from animal rights activists as an effort to limit medical research. To the contrary, we support their work. Look at the record. Most medical research is federally funded and vote

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after vote in Congress shows stout support for medical research grants.

However, when confronted with efforts to improve lab animal care, many institutions assert that they know better. We are neither scientific know-nothings nor are we out to smash laboratories. There is plenty of room for improving both the care of animals and advancing research. These dual causes do, in fact, mesh and complement each other.

The quest continues for better understanding of psychological well-being of primates and for ways to translate that knowledge into more humane care. There is no expectation nor requirement that laboratory animals have a great amount of freedom. But can we provide less than humane care to those primates that are giving their lives for us?

John Melcher practiced veterinary medicine for 20 years before being elected to Congress in 1969. A Democrat from Montana, he served eight years in the House and 12 years in the Senate.

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