

of animals in the worlds of entertainment and research

Protest over Aids tests on chimps

by KEVIN TOOLIS

GOVERNMENT scientists will be seeking around 30 chimpanzees to inject with the Aids virus if plans to set up a new research laboratory at Porton Down in Wiltshire get the go-ahead.

The only other Aids laboratories using primates are in the United States. The labs require stringent security to safeguard staff and the public from the Aids-infected chimpanzees, which are housed in special metal and glass-walled cages connected to independent air systems.

'At this point chimpanzees are the only model available to do human Aids virus vaccine work. They are 100 per cent infectable with the virus,' said Dr Jorg Eichberg, head of Aids research at the South-West Foundation for Biomedical Research in Texas, which has 172 chimps in its research programme.

'Once you get to the nitty gritty, essential questions like the efficacy and efficiency of vaccines have to be tested in chimpanzees. A chimp is excellent as the only model to test vaccines,' he said.

Porton Down is the only British research centre with suitable isolation facilities and experience of working with rare and dangerous viruses. It is understood that some of the £20 million being sought by the Medical Council for Aids Research will be used to establish the proposed chimpanzee Aids vaccine programme at Porton's Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research.

Britain's leading Aids researchers are currently using American laboratories. 'We are now at the stage where testing in chimpanzees is important,' said Dr Ruth Jarrett, a Glasgow University scientist associated with the US National Cancer Institute. 'In the area of vaccine research a lot of vaccines that have been experimentally developed have to be tested. It would be nice if we could inoculate animals somewhere in Britain.'

But the validity of the proposed chimpanzee tests has been questioned by other

scientists. Although chimpanzees become infected with the Aids virus they do not develop the disease itself. Nor has any chimpanzee died of Aids.

Predictably, animal rights groups object to the conditions in which the research chimpanzees are held. American animal protesters who broke into SEMA Corporation's Maryland Aids primate centre last winter claim the 30 infected chimps were suffering from sensory deprivation.

'The chimps were kept in solitary confinement and isolated from each other said the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection's scientific adviser Dr Robert Sharpe. Four baby chimps worth over £9,000 each were stolen by the raiders.

Dr Eichberg reluctantly accepts that isolating intelligent primates like chimps is a necessary evil to save human lives. 'It is true that you deprive these animals by maintaining them in the cage for an extended period. But they have to donate that time for research and after that they can live a normal life.'

Scientists angry

Like their US colleagues, British scientists are angry about claims of cruelty or ill-treatment in work they regard as vital to producing a vaccine. 'It is absolutely shocking,' said Dr Jarrett. 'We have one of the world's gravest health problems and people still object to research involving animals. In some areas laboratory work is enough for a breakthrough but in other areas, particularly vaccines, we do require animals to develop safe and efficacious drugs.'

'Perhaps animal rights protesters are willing to see drugs tested straight on humans but I would rather see drugs tested on another animal species before widescale human usage.'

The worldwide scarcity of legally-obtained chimpanzees will also be a major obstacle for British researchers; Britain's current stock of 260, mainly held in zoos, is not enough for experimentation and breeding programmes. Fresh stock would be required from Central Africa.

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Kingdom and Ireland, the RSPCA has been concerned about hare coursing for many years and dog-fighting occurs across Europe, especially in Malta.

The RSPCA-backed Overseas Fund has publicised the plight of chimpanzees, tigers and lion cubs which are drugged by beach photographers in Spain and the Canary Islands to pose for tourist snaps.

It has also protested over the methods used in the slaughter of frogs, cats and dogs, for human consumption.

As *The Observer* has highlighted recently, the RSPCA is also concerned about the conditions in which sheep are transported long distances in Europe.

THE USE of animals in bizarre spectator sports is not restricted to Spain. An attraction in New York is 'diving mules,' (above) where the animals are made to plunge off high springboards into water.

When perched at the top of the narrow-sided diving boards, the mules throw themselves off rather than turn back.

Their owners claim the animals are perfectly happy and jump enthusiastically each time.

