

Primate welfare at the Institute of Primate Research (IPR)

Since our arrival on the 11th of July 2010, we have had the opportunity to observe and participate in the work of IPR. We were warmly welcomed and everyone was very kind, taking time out of their busy schedules to share their knowledge and involve us in the activities of IPR. We are very grateful for this hospitality and we believe we have learnt a lot from this experience.

We were interested to learn more about the use of primates in scientific research and the potential benefit to the medical profession. We had a particular interest in the project with which we were directly associated; the use of non-human primates as a model for schistosomiasis. In addition, as veterinary students, we were interested in the welfare of the animals used in the research. Everyone we met was keen to assist and share with us the process from quarantine to the scientific procedures.

Having been involved in such activities, as requested, we have compiled several of our ideas to improve and enrich the lives of primates used in research. These range from simple ideas that could be put in place with relative ease, to more long-term goals that could be implemented should funds become available.

We believe in the use of animals scientific research but we also believe this should be done with due concern for animal welfare. All research institutes should be guided by the concepts of the “Three Rs” (Russell & Burch 1959) to ensure that animal welfare is optimised. Our ideas stem from these principles.

Reduce

We understand the importance of animal models as a study of disease and at present the rate of captive breeding is not sufficient for current research protocols. A careful review of the number of non-human primates used may reduce the numbers needed, thus removing the need for wild trapping. We believe that this is important as wild animals will always suffer more stress in captivity than captive-bred animals. Therefore their use should be avoided whenever possible.

Refine

We observed the fear displayed by the non-human primates at IPR of white coats worn by vets, technicians and us, visiting students. We felt that this stress could be minimised by limiting the use of white coats, and offering visitors an alternative colour such that the technician wears with which

the animal seem more comfortable.

We felt that housing could be improved and thus, the animals' lives could be enriched. Male baboons have to live alone for most of their lives and therefore improvements in the size of their cages should be a priority. Furthermore, we would be keen to see a reduction in the number of individual cages, with careful design of each project. We understand that group-housing would increase the handling time and complexity of each study but additional staff and fewer animals could overcome this. If individual housing cannot be avoided, mesh rather than solid partitions should be used, allowing social interaction with neighbouring primates because they are highly sociable species.

We were pleased to be involved in the developing enrichment programme - feeding of fruit to the primates, allowing the animals to become familiarised with the people involved in the research in a more positive setting. The use of vegetation e.g. branches and bushes, should be considered in order to enrich their living environment.

During squeeze anaesthesia we noted the noise made by the crush cages. Simple oiling and maintenance would reduce this and thereby hopefully reduce the level of stress. The use of squeeze cages could be reduced if use were made of the primates' intelligence by training them. We observed the early stages of "clicker training", but we believe that more time should be set aside to allow this important project to progress. Further training, such as the offering of the animal's hand for sample collection, would be advantageous. We have seen this technique being used successfully in zoos in Europe.

Replacement

Careful consideration is needed as to whether primates are essential for each individual project at IPR. This requires close liaison with researchers in toxicology, pharmacology and molecular genetics thereby ensuring that all vital groundwork has been covered before embarking on the use of animal models as opposed to other methods.

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