

# Activists fight to save chimps from return to US labs

March 6 2011, by Jean-Louis Santini

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Chimpanzees play at a zoo. A battle by animal rights activists to save 14 chimpanzees from science and medical testing may well sound the death knell for all US medical experiments on these primates.

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Rights and ethics groups led by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) have seized on the case which pits them against a powerful federal research agency, the National Institutes of Health, and revives debate the usefulness, as well as the ethics, of experimenting on humankind's closest living relatives.

Dallas doctor John Pippin, a PCRM senior adviser, said the NIH "acted

unlawfully" in June and July 2010 when it transferred four female and 10 male [chimps](#) to a controversial laboratory in San Antonio, Texas for use in invasive experiments.

Pippin and several other experts who are members of the non-profit PCRM filed a legal petition seeking immediate return of the chimps to their home at a non-research government facility in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where they lived with 186 other [chimpanzees](#).

Moving the animals "was arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of agency discretion, and in violation of the federal Administrative Procedure Act," Pippin told AFP in an interview.

The animals sent to the Southwest National Primate Research Center (SNPRC) are "old and sick," Pippin said. The research, he added, "is scientifically useless and also horribly inhumane."

The experts cite Rosie, a 29-year-old chimpanzee who was chemically immobilized 99 times by researchers in years of invasive experiments, as one of the 14 brought out of retirement and sent to Texas.

Chimpanzees have been used in research for decades, but many scientists have dismissed their usefulness in AIDS and malaria research, and their effectiveness in studies of hepatitis and other infections is in dispute.

After the European Union's 27 member states banned primate experiments last year, the United States is now the only industrialized nation which has not outlawed such research.

Contacted by AFP, the NIH had yet to make a comment on the case as of late Friday -- but there are signs it is reacting to mounting pressure over the chimpanzees.

Activist groups and the then-governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson, managed to convince NIH to suspend transfer of other chimpanzees from Alamogordo, according to Pippin.

NIH has agreed to await the findings of the independent Institute of Medicine, which has now launched what NIH acknowledged is "in-depth analysis to reassess the scientific need for the continued use of chimpanzees to accelerate biomedical discoveries."

It could take up to two years for the findings of the institute's study to emerge.

The PCRM notes that the institute which oversees the Texas primate center endorses primate studies involving "bioterrorism agents and other deadly pathogens" including Ebola virus and anthrax, in addition to work on AIDS and other infections.

Pippin and others insist the chimp research has no scientific value.

"The proof is that we don't have any Hepatitis C vaccine, we don't have any AIDS vaccine, malaria vaccine," he said.

"We don't have an effective treatment for any of these diseases that have been studied on chimpanzees for decades."

But some researchers insist the experiments are vital, and vigorously defend lab research on animals such as mice and chimpanzees to advance medicine.

"We've made a lot of progress in research on hepatitis using chimpanzees," SNPRC director John VandeBerg told the Washington Post this week.

VandeBerg acknowledged that other developed nations no longer use chimpanzees for medical experiments, but stressed that European societies "made a decision that was driven by animal rights advocates," and that European scientists still come to the United States to do research on primates.

"They need chimpanzees just as badly as we do," he said.

About 1,000 chimpanzees remain in US laboratories, including 500 at NIH facilities. Their number has decreased in recent years as breeding chimpanzees in captivity is now banned and importing them is illegal.

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