H. VAN WESTBROEK/BPRC

The chimps are down: macaques will take centre-stage at the Biomedical Primate Research Centre.

Europe brings experiments on chimpanzees to an end

Sally Goodman, Paris

The only research facility in Europe conducting experiments on chimpanzees is to end all research using the apes.

The decision to stop the experiments at the Biomedical Primate Research Centre (BPRC) in Rijswijk, the Netherlands, comes after years of dissatisfaction over funding, and criticism from animal-rights groups over the the chimps' living conditions.

A report commissioned for the Dutch science ministry, made public on 27 April, said that research on chimpanzees housed at the centre should be phased out and the animals rehoused.

Anton Berns, head of research at the Netherlands Cancer Institute and chairman of the committee that produced the report, says: "Researchers at the BPRC are also victims of the poor facilities. They have been unable to improve the situation because of the lack of funding."

The centre, which houses around 1,300 non-human primates including 108 chimpanzees, is currently funded by the Dutch science ministry to the tune of 5.2 million guilders (US$2.1 million) per year — about a quarter of its running costs. The rest comes from the European Commission and from private research contracts. Much of the centre's research is on vaccines for AIDS and hepatitis C, although malaria and other parasitic diseases are also investigated.

Some researchers have attacked the decision. One British scientist, who declined to be identified, said: "For years, we were positively encouraged by the European Commission to use the BPRC as a core research facility. We will be losing a valuable resource."

BPRC's director Ronald Bontrop says the unit will accept the committee's recommendation to end chimp research, provided that the income needed to assure its future as a "quality research centre", working with other primates, can be guaranteed.

The committee accepts that work with chimps on hepatitis C is justified as they are the only other species to carry the virus — but it suggests that the work be done with larger chimp colonies in the United States. It recommends that hepatitis work at Rijswijk be phased out over two or three years, but that AIDS work ceases immediately.

The future of the chimps is uncertain. The committee says that those infected with viruses should be given special housing, and healthy animals should go to sanctuaries or zoos, using funding from the Dutch government and the European Commission.

Research on the other primates at the centre, notably rhesus macaque monkeys, will continue. But the committee says that more of the work should be conducted in peer-reviewed academic projects rather than under private contracts. It also recommends that the centre, which is currently managed independently, should establish strong links with a university. Leiden or Rotterdam universities are the most likely candidates, says Bontrop.

Hundreds of chimps have been bred in captivity around the world in the past 20 years to provide models for health research, mainly into AIDS vaccines. But it is now generally accepted that rhesus macaques provide a better model for HIV.

This leaves primate centres trying to cope with unneeded chimps, which are expensive to maintain and the culling of which would be unacceptable to the public. And some AIDS researchers still believe that chimps provide a uniquely useful animal model. Understanding why chimps stay healthy when infected with SIV, the simian equivalent of HIV, while humans die of AIDS is "a question of enormous importance", says Mark Feinberg, an immunologist at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. "It needs to be answered whether the research is performed in the Netherlands or not," he says. ■

Record donation from Silicon Valley pioneer goes to Stanford

Jonathan Knight, San Francisco

Stanford University has received a gift of $400 million from the foundation established by Hewlett-Packard founder William Hewlett. The donation is thought to be the largest ever made to an institution of higher education.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which announced the gift on 2 May, hopes it will inspire further donations to universities.

Hewlett was a Stanford graduate who in 1936 co-founded Hewlett-Packard, the electronics company that was to play a central role in the development of Silicon Valley. He died in January at the age of 87, but his son Walter, who is chairman of the Hewlett Foundation, said the gift had been planned for over a year.

A quarter of the money is earmarked for undergraduate education. The rest will go to the School of Humanities and Sciences, the largest of Stanford's seven schools but one less well-endowed than others such as medicine or engineering.

The School of Humanities and Sciences includes most of the university's basic science departments and research labs. Walter Hewlett, who also serves on the school's advisory council, said that it was threatened by budgetary pressures.

"It became clear to me that if something wasn't done to put the school on a more firm financial footing, there would be a major deterioration," he said.

William Hewlett and Hewlett-Packard co-founder David Packard, also a Stanford graduate, had already given some $300 million to the university over the years.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, the only larger gift to higher education on record is the $1 billion pledged by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates in 1999 for the Gates Millennium Scholars Program. ■

AP

Sunny outlook: William Hewlett's donation will aid humanities and science at Stanford.