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# US plans more primate research

Scientists in the United States are planning for an increase of non-human primate research.

Currently, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds eight National Primate Research Centers with a total of about 26,000 animals. But several factors are expected to drive demand, among them the failure last year of an HIV vaccine candidate being trialled by the pharmaceutical company Merck. Such failures have underscored the need for more non-human primate research to answer basic questions about the virus and to develop new vaccine concepts.

“We fully anticipate that the animal model will have a resurgence of interest and importance because we need it to answer some of those fundamental questions,” says Anthony Fauci, director of the NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious



**Rhesus macaques are often used for primate research.**

Diseases in Bethesda, Maryland.

A greater focus on clinical research is also expected to boost primate work. For instance, on 18 May, researchers from the Yerkes National Primate Center in Atlanta, Georgia, announced that they had made significant progress towards a transgenic model of Huntington’s disease in rhesus macaques engineered to carry the genetic defect responsible for the disease (see S.-H. Yang *et al. Nature* doi: 10.1038/nature06975; 2008).

Five of the eight national primate centres are also located near institutions that have received grants specifically to bolster clinical and translational science. “We want to go from basic research forward into preclinical and clinical models, and animal models are a very important part of that type of development,” says Barbara

Alving, director of the National Center for Research Resources in Bethesda.

But meeting the demand is a complicated issue. India, the preferred country of origin for the animals, has a long-standing ban on exporting rhesus macaques. Breeding more will take years, and it is not yet clear how many additional animals will be needed, because scientists have not yet told the NIH exactly what research must be done. With agency budgets staying flat in recent years, the primate centres have already formed a consortium to pool resources and make sure they breed enough animals to meet the needs of NIH-funded scientists.

Fauci says the NIH will be consulting with HIV researchers and scientists over the coming year to solidify its plans. This month, his institute solicited comment on the ‘highly innovative strategies to prevent HIV transmission’, or ‘HIT-IT’ initiative, a programme that is likely to lead to more non-human primate work. ■

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