

# Make a wish

by Paul McKellips

Commercial airlines have done some pretty amazing things over the years, especially in the area of humanitarian outreach. Some donate cargo space for relief supplies for the victims of tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan and for those devastated by earthquakes in Haiti and Peru. Others donate seats and reduce fares for medical and dental outreach teams who travel to developing countries to give of their time and talents. And many offer 'frequent flyer' programs that allow us 'road warriors' to donate our earned miles to men and women in uniform, so that they can travel home from distant combat zones to reunite with their families. The same miles can often be used by family members who desperately need to see their wounded military members recuperating in Washington, DC, or San Antonio, TX.

Airlines might also participate in 'make a wish' programs that enable terminally ill children to take the adventure of a very short lifetime. Perhaps one of the most difficult—yet incredibly touching and special—sights to see is the excited face of a young passenger-patient about to take such a flight. The employees of every airline in the world, as well as the families and friends of every passenger that ever walks down a jet-bridge to take a seat, all understand that disease and debilitating conditions are no respecters of persons. It doesn't matter if you're male or female, young or old, white, black, American, Iranian, Russian, Chinese, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or none of the above; none of us is immune from suffering with disease or premature death.

In those final, fragile days, I'm grateful that an airline opens up a seat to let a child go ahead and make a wish. With unfettered glee and excitement, I've seen these little faces glued to the airplane window as they watch the busy activity of the airport, ground crews and baggage handlers as they load the cargo

bay. These children see every color and size of suitcase ever invented. They see golf clubs, skis, boxes of freshly caught fish packed in dry ice, and boxes and bundles of mail being carried to exotic destinations around the world. But unless these children are flying on Air France, there's one thing they won't see being loaded into the cargo compartment: the potential cure for the disease they wish they didn't have.

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Air France is the only airline that still allows nonhuman primates to be shipped to biomedical research labs in their cargo holds. Kudos to you, Air France! What does Air France know that American, United, Delta, Southwest, US Airways, Air Canada, Lufthansa, British Air, Emirates Air and a host of other airlines fail to grasp?

A very small minority of the world's population and the traveling public now believes that using nonhuman primates in biomedical research is controversial and inhumane. Yet a very large majority of biomedical researchers and physicians worldwide now believes that children and patients of all ages allowed to suffer with terminal diseases and debilitating conditions is controversial and inhumane.

The first airplanes I flew on in the 1960s were slow and fuel-inefficient. But aviation changed as technology evolved. Thanks to aviation research and testing, modern jets are faster and more fuel-efficient.

A child given a leukemia diagnosis in the 1960s faced a very uncertain future. But medicine changed as research evolved.

Thanks to animal research and testing, a child diagnosed under the age of 15 today has a 60–85% five-year survival rate with leukemia.

I suspect that technology will dramatically change and improve all forms of air and ground transportation in the next few decades. And I know that technology will allow biomedical researchers to unlock the mysteries of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, cancer and cystic fibrosis in the decades to come as well.

Empty cargo holds, where today's nonhuman primates can't get boarding passes, should be loaded with potential research breakthroughs for women's health, behavioral studies, coronary heart disease, drug addiction, cognitive impairment, cholesterol and lipid metabolism, obesity, diabetes, arthritis and bone loss.

I understand that some people have an emotional response to animal research. I realize that they find research with nonhuman primates controversial and unsettling. But I believe that dreadful diseases that take the innocent in the prime of their lives is equally controversial and incredibly unsettling, especially given the evolution of research and modern technology that allows us to refine our studies, replace animal models where possible and reduce the number of animals needed when we can.

The history of aviation is filled with stories of airlines acting as good citizens for the entire planet. They have brought heroes back from war and taken families to bedsides. They have delivered disaster relief to faraway shores and expert medical help to remote villages. And as they continue to grant a young child's last wish up in a first-class seat today, I wish they'd consider carrying the potential cures down in the cargo bay tomorrow.

Modern biomedical research is faster and more fuel-efficient than ever before. We are so close to breakthrough destinations. We just need a ride. Vive la France!

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