

The last airline flying

Kirk Leech

On December 11, 2015 anti-animal research activists in New York, adorned with snappy slogans such as, “Air France = Partners in Animal Abuse” and “Air France Profits off Animal Abuse,” made a brief protest inside the foyer of the Manhattan offices of Air France. Their beef: Air France transports Non-Human Primates (NHPs) and other animals for biomedical research. Predictably, the publicity around the protest was louder than the protest itself, but this ongoing campaign against the transport of laboratory animals demands a robust response from the scientific community.

The campaign against Air France, organized by groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and Cruelty Free International (CFI), is the epicenter of a growing celebrity-led crusade to halt the transportation of research animals, in particular NHPs and dogs. Celebrities, including Justin Bieber, James Cromwell, Woody Harrelson, UK comic Ricky Gervais and musician Peter Gabriel, have all voiced support for the campaign against Air France’s transportation of animals for research. Such high-profile and celebrity-led campaigns have proven to be very successful in forcing airlines out of the business of transporting animals. Air France is the only commercial airline still prepared, even with the ongoing campaigns against it, to transport research primates for biomedical research. PETA recently claimed that, “with no way to cheaply and easily obtain monkeys from abroad many laboratories will have a difficult, if not impossible, time getting their hands on animals to torment in cruel and archaic tests,” adding that “because of PETA’s success convincing major airlines to stop shipping primates to laboratories, there has been a nearly 35% drop in imports of monkeys to labs in recent years, a 15% decrease in the total number of primates in US laboratories” (*The*

Guardian, May 2014). PETA and CFI believe that they have the wind in their sails and are prepared to throw their massive resources at Air France, the last airline flying.

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However, let’s imagine for a moment that this celebrity led crusade began in the 1980s—that the Biebers, Gervais and Cromwells of that time had been successful in halting the global transport of NHPs and dogs, ending such “cruel and archaic tests.” What advances in scientific understanding and what discoveries involving dogs and NHPs would we not have today? Firstly, NHP and mouse models have been key to developing anti-retroviral drugs that help prevent transmission of HIV and improve and extend the lives of those infected with the virus. Secondly, because dogs’ heart physiology and anatomy closely resembles that of humans, dogs are especially suitable for research on cardiovascular diseases. Electrical defibrillators, some heart medications and blood transfusion procedures exist today thanks to research using dogs. Thirdly, the development of RTS,S (Mosquirix), a vaccine for malaria, was built on 30 years of research using mice and NHPs. Finally, many breakthroughs in treatment for Parkinson’s disease have relied on animal research. Current drug therapies and tremor-reducing deep-brain stimulation have transformed patients’ lives and could not have been developed without research using NHPs.

If all airlines had capitulated to such demands from PETA and CFI in the 1980s, as all but Air France have done in the past decade, then our understanding of diseases like Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, HIV and malaria would be years behind where it is now. Studies in dogs and NHPs form a small but vital part of the research and development process required to develop new medical treatments for human diseases. Dogs provide the most appropriate model to test the effectiveness of certain new medicines for cardiovascular diseases, such as myocardial and valve disease. Likewise, although scientists can increase our understanding of human disease using other species, because NHPs are humanity’s closest evolutionary relatives in nature, studies using primates are especially important. An article in the *American Journal of Primatology* made the case for the use of NHPs: “We are at a critical crossroads in our society and unless NHP research is given the philosophical, emotional, and financial support and infrastructure that is needed to sustain it and grow, we are in danger of losing irreplaceable unique models and thus, our ability to continue to explore and understand, and develop preventions and treatments for numerous conditions that inflict great suffering on humans.” (*Am. J. Primatol.* 76, 801–827; 2014).

More people are alive, living longer and with improved quality of life thanks to medical advances which would not have been possible without animal research. It is to the credit of Air France that they continue to transport NHPs and other research animals. The research community in the United States and Europe should make vocal their thanks to Air France and encourage other transport providers to take part in this life-saving endeavor.

Leech is the Executive Director, European Animal Research Association (EARA), London, UK.