COVID-19 Q&A: Animal care continues

Thea Brabb and Sally Thompson-Iritani explain to Lab Animal how their mouse and nonhuman primate colonies continue to be cared for at the University of Washington and Washington National Primate Research Center.

■ What is your role at your facility, what animals do you care for, and what are they used for?

Thea Brabb is the Professor and Chair of the Department of Comparative Medicine, which provides husbandry and veterinary care for the majority of the non-primate vertebrate research animals at the University of Washington (UW).

Dr. Sally Thompson-Iritani is the Director (Interim) of the Washington National Primate Research Center, which provides husbandry, veterinary, and research support for non-human primates used in biomedical research.

■ How has your facility responded to COVID-19?

As of this time (April 1st), animal care in all of our animal facilities has moved forward uninterrupted. We instituted teleworking for all staff that could utilize that mechanism in early March and have instituted social distancing in all animal facilities and UW spaces. In response to the UW's direction on March 18th, we asked researchers not working on research covered in that UW directive to postpone research efforts. For longitudinal NHP and other animal studies that were in progress, we have continued to provide research support to ensure the utility of these important studies is realized. We stopped ordering of animals that did not meet research directives. We also asked mouse researchers that breed mice to keep their colonies as small as is feasible.

In addition, we have gathered and donated as much PPE as possible to UW Medicine for distribution to UW hospitals or local health care facilities.

■ Did you feel prepared?

We had a phased emergency plan in place as do all research facilities. It has been updated and changed many times in the last month to address the changing landscape, but it provided a good template and place to start. At the University of Washington, we have been in close communication with our leaders and each other as there have been shifts in guidance. Communication between research facilities across the nation has continued as well and is a way to share ideas and practices. The Primate Center participates in consortium activities that include all 7 Primate Centers to share information and provide guidance for one another.

Communication has been the greatest challenge. At times, there has been so much communication it is difficult to keep up with the changes. As such, we have not always been as effective as possible with our communication to researchers and staff. We are still learning the best and most effective ways to achieve useful communication in this ever changing environment. Having a centralized communication portal that everyone can refer to is critical.

■ How will things return to normal when the time comes?

Our facilities have not shut down; however, researchers have trimmed their mouse

breeding colonies, are not breeding animals for experiments, and are not ordering animals. This will put researchers behind when they restart their research efforts. The timing will depend on the type of experiment, from several weeks to many months.

At the same time, there is a strong effort being made to encourage researchers to plan for restarting by considering what tools and reagents are needed, and creating new research and IACUC protocols. Our return to normal will largely be in alignment with the societal return to normal. We will gradually re-incorporate ourselves into our routines, get people back to work to enable the research to move forward. One of the biggest things will be thinking about if there are any processes or procedures that we are going to do differently going forward and ensuring that we adequately plan and adjust.

■ Anything else you'd like to share?

We cautiously anticipate that this pandemic experience may result in a greater societal recognition of the critical nature of biomedical research, resulting in more robust, consistent and continuous funding of science. Research is essential to our ability to nimbly respond to future global health challenges.

Interviewed by Ellen P. Neff

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