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—Photos by Rita Nannini for The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Henri, a Simian Aide, prepares a drink for quadriplegic Sue Stron.

## Simian Aides for the Disabled: Ethical Concerns

The training of small monkeys to run errands and help care for quadriplegics started on an experimental basis in 1977 at Tufts University New England Medical Center. The founder, a psychologist, Dr. Mary Joan Willard, has now opened a center for training capuchin monkeys called "Helping Hands: Simian Aides for the Disabled" at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. In an article appearing in the October 1986 issue of *Smithsonian*, J.T. MacFadyen describes what wonderful good fortune it can be for a quadriplegic to have a monkey. "The main thing is independence" said one quadriplegic who directs his monkey with a small laser-pointer in his mouth to open

and shut doors, turn lights on and off, fetch books, put audiotapes in his cassette player, bring snacks and drinks, and even feed him. Asked about robots, he said: "Robots won't play with you . . . won't jump around your living room . . . comb your hair and beard with their fingers . . . chew at your face . . . pretty dull." Another quadriplegic spoke up: "Having her (the capuchin) has completely changed my life."

But unlike Seeing Eye dogs for the blind, the Simian Aides program appears to have no stringent rules or carefully instilled customs to protect the little slaves from carelessness or abuse from unsym-

pathetic or irritable patients—abuse which is all too possible. And there are two procedures which are more suggestive of psychological research practices than of the better techniques used in animal training. One procedure is the use of electric shock administered via remote control by the patient to stop the monkey from "misbehaving". The other is the extraction of all the monkey's teeth during the training period to guard "against the chance that they might wound someone with a bite."

Below are four opinions rendered on the subject of Simian Aides by people with knowledge of primates.

### Emmanuel Bernstein, Ph.D., Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals:

First of all, we have a situation here where one being is at the mercy of another, so there must be some safeguards for the powerless one in order to begin making this situation ethical. A major concern would be the shocking device; although we would have to have more information about the degree of shock it is capable of administering. There would be individual pain thresholds that need to be considered for each primate. The device would have the potential of being painful and stressful, I suspect, contrary to what the *Smithsonian* article would lead us to believe.

As in the case of the Seeing Eye dogs, the organization needs a policy to immediately respond to any complaint against a "simian owner", calling him or her back for re-training with the servant animal. In addition, the shocking device itself needs to have a counter that accurately reports how many shocks the "owner" has given. The counter needs to be checked after the first week, then regularly, to find signs of excessive use. Ascertaining the number of shocks above which the simian and

human should be called back for re-training should not be too difficult for the organization to determine.

### Don Barnes, The National Anti-Vivisection Society:

Do their teeth *have* to be removed? Yes, I suspect they do. A primary reason for failure with simian companions has to do with biting behavior, and capuchins have very sharp teeth and are perfectly willing to use them.

Is "negative reinforcement" (i.e., shock) required? Again, I'm afraid the answer is "yes". The shock may indeed be a tingle, but I suspect that tingle is a "secondary reinforcer" for previously delivered shock of a greater magnitude—another reason for re-training sessions, that is, to reinforce the connection between pain and tingle. Is that justified? My position is that no unnecessary pain is justified. But I'm not a quadriplegic.

I wonder how much money is actually put into the purchase, housing, training, re-training, monitoring, etc., of one of these animals. Might it be enough to hire and maintain a human companion? Does it matter if the human aide costs

## COMMENT

more? Can a monkey make an emergency phone call, wheel a chair from a burning building, season one's food, change one's clothes, put one to bed? It is obvious that the Simian Aide is a very limited "resource". Can we afford to expend many resources on such a grey area? Would the quadriplegic prefer a human aide?

We seldom, if ever, challenge the concept of the Seeing Eye dogs, for these animals have become an accepted part of our lives. But not long ago, I was in a restaurant in Georgetown, and a heavy-set, florid gentleman was at the bar with his Seeing Eye dog. And he stayed and stayed and stayed; and I was watching the dog crammed between two barstools amidst the smoke and clatter and inane preppy conversations—which may have been worse than electric shock. But would I consign the blind to their rooms and take away the dogs? I don't know the answers.



*Allison Pascoe trains capuchin monkeys for the program.*

### **F. Barbara Orlans, Ph.D., Scientists Center for Animal Welfare:**

In general, I am supportive of the idea of having monkeys aid human patients who desperately need help. As a deaf person myself, I understand fully the value of these aides.

That said, however, I have grave reservations about extracting their teeth, and also some concern about the electric shock. Although I have neither specific data nor personal experience, I think that removing all the teeth of every monkey is unjustified. The animal is forever unable to bite, chew, or enjoy his normal food. This amounts to a permanent deprivation. Some other procedure should be found, such as selecting out the less aggressive monkeys. Also, the humans need rigorous training in how to command obedience from the animals, and it may be that not all the humans would qualify either. The use of electric shock for punishment in training is questionable, although, in the particular circumstances involved, it may be justified for a limited time period. It is part of life that we have to live with the less than perfect behavior of our companion animals. I would recommend that the patients be instructed in how to discipline the animals without resorting to electric shocks. In training the animals to avoid situations that are

dangerous to themselves (such as meddling with medicines) or destructive to property, some obedience training is essential. Very mild electric shocks could be substituted with auditory stimuli (voice commands or buzzer). I understand the patients are told to use shock only when two verbal commands have failed. This seems to be reasonable. With compassion for all involved, this program could be made to work and work well.

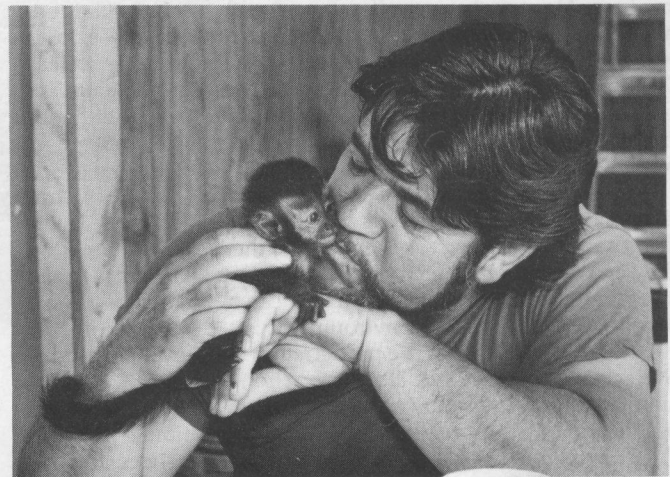
### **Nedim Buyukmihci, V.M.D., Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights:**

I am philosophically opposed to the use of nonhuman primates in the manner described because the animals: 1) are not domestic; 2) are not psychologically dependent on humans (as many truly domesticated animals seem to be); 3) have high potential for abuse; 4) are usually in an environment devoid of other members of their species; 5) are denied the opportunity to behave naturally; and 6) are forced to do things unnatural for them. Moreover, their use leads to the probability of "legitimizing" the taking of free-living nonhuman primates from their native habitat. Therefore, whether it is necessary to mutilate their mouths by extracting teeth, or modify their behavior by electrical shocks is moot to me. It takes very little thought to realize that these animals become, in essence, a nonhuman version of a slave. This is not to say that I do not feel deeply for the humans who are disabled. I just do not know how to resolve the moral conflict this use of nonhuman primates necessarily entails.

There may be, however, individual nonhuman primates who already are in captivity and are not releasable or cannot be put into a colony. From a pragmatic perspective, they could be used for the purposes stated above if they were in the home of a person who would love and respect them rather than simply view them as a resource for their own advancement. This would mean adequate socialization to the person, proper diet, veterinary care, and a permanent home until they die of natural causes. Provisions would have to be made to care for (not kill) the nonhuman primate in the event the human pre-deceases her or him.

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*Infant monkeys are placed in foster homes for "socialization".*