UConn Research on Monkeys Stirs a Student's Protest

By JANE GORDON

JUSTIN GOODMAN, a UConn graduate student in sociology, has been staging campus protests for months in an attempt to save four monkeys being used for research at the university's health center in Farmington. On Monday, he found out that two of them were already dead, one having died in the course of the research.

"It's upsetting," he said. "I think, though, that it's telling that one of them died. It shows there are very real risks for these animals, and that as hard as the university tries to uphold its standards and follow the rules, you can't anticipate everything."

Mr. Goodman, who is president of the University of Connecticut Animal Rights Collective, which he said had 10 active members, was protesting alone in the snow on Monday outside the Storrs office of UConn's president. But animal rights groups across the nation were behind him on the Internet. The Web site for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals called on the health center to stop experiments on the monkeys with a headline, "University of Connecticut: Free the Primates." The Primate Freedom Project's headline was equally fervent: "Help Save 4 Rhesus at Univ. of Conn. From Imminent Death."

"I've never once accused them of mishandling or mistreating the animals," Mr. Goodman said. "I've never said they were breaking the law. The campaign we have is a moral crusade. They refuse to address the ethical nature of what they're doing."

At issue, originally, were the four rhesus macaque monkeys, known more commonly as organ-grinders' monkeys. They had been used for research at the University of Connecticut Health Center by Dr. David M. Waitzman, an associate professor of neurology. According to a report on the health center's primate research from Dr. Peter J. Deckers, the center's executive vice president for health affairs, Dr. Waitzman has been exploring the brain's control of eye movements. The report, which was written as a result of Mr. Goodman's efforts and presented to Philip Austin, the UConn president, on Monday, said two of the monkeys had died.

"One animal was euthanized at the end of its study period -- part of the experimental protocol -- and a second died during the course of the research, although it had received proper veterinary attention and treatment," the report said. "A third is currently being studied, and the fourth has yet to be entered into the protocol, but is housed at the Health Center."

Neither Mr. Austin nor the health center officials would comment for this article, but in early January the center issued a statement that said it was complying with federal guidelines in its treatment of the monkeys. In an e-mail message last week, Dr. Waitzman declined to comment.

"The university has made it clear I cannot have independent contact with the press," Dr. Waitzman...
wrote.

In the report, Dr. Deckers explained why the health center uses the monkeys for research.

"We conduct such research to advance bio-medical science and thereby, through an improved understanding of the mechanisms involved, create treatment for humans with diseases or neurological disorders that lessens symptoms and even one day be curative," the report said. "I can assure you that use of non-human primates only occurs when there are no other reasonable or practical alternative to achieve the desired results."

Dr. Waitzman received a $216,336 grant from the National Eye Institute, a division of the National Institutes of Health, in 1998 for a study period that was to last until March 2003. The institute awarded him another grant of $121,659 that extended his research into the spring of this year, and according to the report, Dr. Waitzman planned to apply for a renewal grant to continue his work. Mr. Goodman and the various animal rights groups said they feared that the monkeys would be killed when the research is completed.

United States Department of Agriculture records showed that the department, which oversees animal laboratories nationally, has pursued two cases against the university and its lab. One in 2002 resulted in a fine of $129,500 that involved numerous complaints, including failure to provide adequate veterinary care. The second, in 1998, which resulted in a fine of $9,000, found that the attending veterinarian at the lab did not have proper authority over the health and well-being of the animals, said Darby Holladay, a spokesman for the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service of the Department of Agriculture, which enforces the Animal Welfare Act.

On the UConn Animal Rights Collective's Web site, Mr. Goodman has posted a petition calling for the health center to stop the testing on the monkeys and free the animals. Other animal rights groups also have posted the petition and have written notes to their members encouraging them to write letters to Mr. Austin.

"We see this as a very winnable campaign," said Alka Chandna, a spokeswoman for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. "The experiments being done by UConn violate the sensibilities of the average person. People understand that these animals are so much like us. We are asking the university, once the funding stops, to stop the protocol, retire the primates and stop primate experimentation on the campus. It would allow the university to become an ethical frontrunner in this tide of concern, and I think that would speak very well for UConn."

Mr. Goodman said he planned to keep protesting at the president's office and has sent e-mail messages to supporters asking them to send letters of protest to UConn.

"I hope they're not so naïve as to think this report is going to stop us," he said. "We're going to be a bigger thorn in their side from here on in."