

Association for the Abolition of Animal Experiments

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The myth of animal experimentation:

The fight against polio

Were animal experiments indispensable to the fight against polio, as animal experimentation supporters claim?

In fact, animal experiments – particularly with monkeys – misled researchers repeatedly, delaying progress against the disease, while exposing those who were treated or vaccinated against polio to serious risks – with tragic consequences:

▶ Already in 1907, studies on patients who had contracted polio showed that the polio virus entered through the mouth and infected the body via the digestive tract. After isolating the polio virus in 1908, however, researchers largely ignored this important discovery and concentrated for the most part on the artificially induced disease in monkeys. These experiments falsely indicated that the polio virus enters through the nose and directly infects the brain. As a consequence, researchers developed a nose-spray which prevented polio infection in monkeys. In 1937 the spray was tested on children but did not protect them from polio, and some of the children lost their sense of smell permanently.

▶ Animal experiments led to further failures – especially in the search for a polio vaccine. Thus, researchers succeeded in vaccinating monkeys against polio by injecting antibodies from diseased animals into the spinal cord of healthy animals. In 1931 this method was tested on humans – without success. In 1934 researchers developed another vaccine obtained from infected monkey spinal cord. Of the 20,000 children who were vaccinated, six died, twelve suffered severe paralyses, and the vaccine was withdrawn.

▶ The use of monkeys in polio research also had tragic consequences in the development in 1954 and 1957 of the polio vaccines of Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin. Although a polio vaccine can be produced from human cell cultures, these vaccines were obtained using cell cultures from monkey kidneys. It has long been known, however, that animal cells are carriers of foreign viruses. Such viruses can become dangerous when the species barrier between humans and animals is breached. Since some of these viruses have a very long incubation period, decades can pass until they cause disease in humans.

▶ It turns out, in fact, that from 1954 until 1963 millions of children and adults in the United States, the USSR and Europe received polio vaccines which were contaminated with the monkey virus SV40. Numerous studies indicate that SV40 promotes cancer in humans, particularly brain tumors, bone tumors and mesotheliomas. Other studies indicate that the AIDS virus HIV was transmitted from monkeys to humans as a result of massive vaccine campaigns in central Africa between 1957 and 1960 using polio vaccines which were obtained from monkey kidney cells contaminated with a monkey AIDS virus similar to HIV.

▶ Industry and regulatory authorities claim that the polio vaccines used today are free of monkey viruses. In Switzerland and the United States, however, these vaccines are still obtained using monkey kidney cells, which can be tested only for known monkey viruses, and to this day only an estimated 2% of all monkey viruses have been identified. The danger therefore still remains today that unknown monkey viruses are being transmitted by the vaccines to humans. For this reason, other countries like Great Britain and Canada stipulate the use of human instead of animal cells in vaccine production.