BRIEFING ON PRIMATE RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA
Animal-Free Science Advocacy (AFSA)
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Why the focus on primates?
Non-human primates (hereafter 'primates') are genetically the closest living creatures to humans. Their sentient ability is thought to be very similar to humans with their complex social interactions. In contrast, a laboratory setting is far removed from the natural habitat.

Animal-Free Science Advocacy is opposed to all animal experimentation. **However, primate research is particularly contentious, presenting a clear ethical dilemma of using animals with high cognitive abilities, a long lifespan, and well-developed social structures as mere 'tools for research'**. The animal welfare impacts associated with their advanced abilities are profound in a research setting, where they may associate previous negative experiences such as invasive procedures with future occurrences.

Background
Australia funds and conducts research on primates, primarily macaques, marmosets and baboons. These animals are recognised as some of the most cognitively complex and socially sophisticated species used in laboratories. They possess advanced memory, problem-solving abilities, emotional awareness and complex social relationships. Unlike many other laboratory animals, primates can live for decades in captivity. Yet there are currently **no dedicated sanctuary facilities in Australia for primates** once their use in research has ended.

It has been demonstrated that primates experience fear, anxiety, depression, grief, social attachment and psychological distress. In the wild they live in complex family groups and may travel many kilometres each day, whereas laboratory housing severely restricts these natural behaviours. In the wild, monkeys can range widely for kilometres. In contrast, a laboratory setting is far removed from the natural habitat. The average laboratory cage of the rhesus macaque is 7 million-fold smaller than their natural home range (1).

Further, the use of Great Apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, bonobos and gorillas) for biomedical research is not permitted in Australia. **The special status granted to great apes on the grounds of moral reasoning should not exclude other primates from the same protection.**

Yet Australia continues to breed and use primates primarily in neuroscience, vision research, infectious disease, reproductive biology and xenotransplantation research.

Images: left to right – Baboon, Macaque and infant, Marmoset and infant

In Australia macaques and marmosets are commonly used in invasive research in the fields of neurological, cognition, vision research or HIV research. Baboons are used for diabetes, pregnancy hypertension, cardiovascular disease and kidney disease research.

Statistics

The most recent Victorian statistics of the number of primates used (2024) indicates 119 primates (53 macaques and 66 marmosets) were used. NSW statistics (2024) indicate 159 baboons were used.

Australia maintains 3 breeding colonies for primates to be used in research.

- Monash Animal Research Platform (managed by Monash University with ownership transferring to Attentive Science, a US contracting company) with a licence to hold up to 850 marmosets and macaques;
- the National Baboon Colony in Wallacia, NSW which has a permit to hold 165 baboons; and
- the Australian Defence Force Malaria and Infectious Diseases Institute in Brisbane with an estimated 31 owl monkeys (government statistics are not provided, and little information is available).

Laboratory housing cannot replicate the complex physical and social environments required by primates. FOI documents reveal incidents involving unexpected deaths, anaesthetic complications, injuries and serious welfare concerns within Australian facilities.

The annual expenditure for animal experimentation using primates in Australia is unreported.

Laws and regulations

Research involving primates funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) must comply with:

- Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (2013, under review until approx. 2027)
- NHMRC Principles and Guidelines for the Care and Use of Non-Human Primates (2016)

These guidelines state that primates should only be used where no suitable alternative exists and where the expected benefits justify the harms. However, AFSA is concerned that there is no independent national oversight of primate research. The NHMRC has confirmed that it does **not** approve individual primate research projects, inspect facilities, or monitor compliance. Responsibility rests largely with institutional Animal Ethics Committees operating under a self-regulatory system. Unlike several overseas jurisdictions, Australia has no additional national approval process specifically for primate research.

AFSA affirms that the current system of self-regulation is ineffective. Without independent oversight nor reporting mechanisms in place, it is unfeasible to evaluate all the primate experimentation that is occurring. The case studies we have compiled lead us to question that the cost-benefit assessments are adequate. In these studies macaques have been trained to perform tasks after induced brain damage, marmosets are deliberately frightened with toy snakes and marmosets are killed to simply confirm existing findings.

Additionally, we lack confidence in animal welfare assurances, given that Freedom of Information requests lodged by AFSA have revealed that:

- A female macaque was found in a barrel outside dead in a pool of blood.
- A female macaque was found in her cage barely able to move. Staff attempted to recover her with fluids and warmth, but she died about 1.5 hours later.
- A female marmoset was found listless and bleeding from her bowel. After being treated and placed in a humidicrib she began gasping for breath and died.
- A male marmoset was found listless with shallow breathing and vomiting clear foamy liquid. The vet was called for treatment, but the marmoset died 30 minutes later.
- A female macaque aged 5.8 years was found on the floor unconscious and not breathing.
- A juvenile female macaque was found dead. An unexplained death but suspected she was subjected to extreme bullying by other macaques.
- A female Macaque, a failed breeder being assessed for a research project, failed to recover from anaesthesia.
- An aged female macaque used in obesity studies was found to be dead when placed on the surgery table.
- A male macaque died under anaesthesia due to human error.

These incidents occurred at Monash University's National Non-Human Primate Breeding and Research Facility in Gippsland, Victoria.

And AFSA's Freedom of Information requests to the **Australian National Baboon Colony** in New South Wales (2025) revealed:

- Mother and baby baboons subjected to invasive experiments
- Repeated anaesthetics and unimaginable suffering
- Infants separated from their mothers
- Infants and young monkeys dying in traumatic circumstances
- Animals left alone in distress
- Deaths occurring overnight, unnoticed until the morning
- Animals killed for "management reasons"

Housing, Welfare, Rehoming & Retirement

Over the past several years AFSA has lodged numerous Freedom of Information requests with Australian universities and government agencies.
These documents have revealed:

- unexpected primate deaths (as shown above)
- welfare concerns
- internal Standard Operating Procedures
- housing (showing small barren cages) and restraint practices

- limited public reporting of outcomes
- absence of retirement pathways.

The documents demonstrate the importance of independent transparency and public accountability for research involving highly sentient animals.

Although NHMRC guidelines recommend retirement be considered where appropriate, there is currently **no** national framework or funding mechanism to support retirement and sanctuary placement. Primates die either as a result of the experiment to which they are subjected or die at the breeding colonies.

Community Expectations
Australian community attitudes have shifted significantly in recent years. Public opinion polling has found strong opposition to the use of primates in research. In March 2026 2,839 Australians signed AFSA's Parliamentary ePetition calling for all primates, not only the great apes, to receive the highest level of protection under Australia's national guidelines. Prior to this in 2022 a petition calling for a ban on primate experimentation with over 100,000 signatures with tabled in the Australian Senate.

Oversight and Transparency Concerns
Australia relies heavily on institutional Animal Ethics Committees to approve primate research. Information obtained from the NHMRC confirms there is no dedicated national body that independently reviews or oversees all primate experiments conducted in Australia. Oversight largely remains within the institutions conducting the research themselves. This raises legitimate questions about:

• Whether replacement alternatives are being fully explored before primates are approved for use.
• Whether harm-benefit assessments are being applied consistently.
• Whether taxpayer-funded projects involving primates deliver outcomes proportionate to the ethical and financial costs involved.

Concerns Regarding Taxpayer-Funded Research
Primate research is funded directly and indirectly through public money. Government funding is principally provided through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC). Australians therefore have a legitimate expectation of transparency, accountability and ethical consistency in decisions relating to the use of these highly sentient animals in research.

While the ethical concerns surrounding primate experimentation are significant in themselves, reviews of non-human primate research have questioned whether the claimed benefits to human health justify the significant ethical costs imposed on these animals. (2)

The NHMRC and the ARC have awarded millions of dollars in grants involving primate research over recent years. These projects include studies examining visual processing, decision-making, brain plasticity, cognitive function and the effects of bushfire exposure on the brains of monkeys.

Examples of recent currently federally funded primate projects include:

- 2022 NHMRC Grant 2011733 to investigate the long-term effects of bushfire smoke exposure on monkeys born during the 2019–20 bushfire season $1,326, 234
- 2026 ARC grant to study the ageing primate brain awarded to Marcello Rosa et al, Monash University to study the ageing primate brain $1,697,115 .00

- 2026 ARC grant to study neocortical neuronal networks (basic science with no direct relevance to humans) $1,610,200.00

Translation of primate research
It has been argued that primate research is essential to advance human health. Indeed, this is a common assumption due to their close genetic relationship to humans. Yet, we are separated by 25 million years of evolution. There are major anatomical, genetic, dietetic, environmental, toxic, and immune differences. Additionally, laboratory conditions impact on the brain and immune system, which effects the reliability of data (3). Systematic reviews of primate research indicate that the perceived benefits to humans are overstated and that non-human primate (NHP) models have provided disappointing contributions toward human medical advancements (4).

AFSA also notes that some of the funded research appears to be verifying existing knowledge rather than generating new data essential to improving human health.

Non-Animal research
Human-based technologies now offer opportunities to reduce or replace primate use in many areas of biomedical research. In fact, in 2023 the CSIRO released its report 'Non-animal models – a strategy for maturing Australia's medical product development capabilities' recognising opportunities for applying non-animal models to medical product development that align Australia's strengths with global need.

Non-animal research methods now include:
- human cell and tissue models
- organoids
- organ-on-chip technology
- advanced imaging
- computational modelling
- artificial intelligence
- genomic technologies
- 3D tissue engineering.

Further detailed information about non-animal methods can be found here at our "Replacing Animals' web page.

Australia's greater investment in these approaches will improve both scientific relevance and animal welfare outcomes.

What AFSA is calling for
Animal-Free Science Advocacy calls on the Australian Government to:
- Extend the special protections currently afforded to great apes to all non-human primates.
- Establish independent national oversight of primate research.
- Improve transparency through publication of non-technical project summaries, retrospective reviews and nationally consistent reporting.
- Increase Commonwealth investment in human-relevant, non-animal research technologies.
- Prohibit the importation of primates for research purposes.
- Establish a national retirement and sanctuary program for laboratory primates.
- Ensure the current review of the Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes delivers meaningful reform for Australia's most cognitively complex research animals.

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