# A Star Is Torn

*The fur flies as Tinseltown's favorite causes lock horns over animal research.*

February 1, 2000 By Douglas Sadownick

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Tensions between animal-rights activists and AIDS advocates escalated last October when a radical group calling itself The Justice Department mailed 87 razor-blade-rigged letters to primate researchers around the country. The letters, one of the most organized animal-rights campaigns to date, warned that scientists who didn't release primate captives would be "subjected to violence which is uncomparable [sic] to booby-trapped letters." This assault came on the heels of spring break-ins organized by the Animal Liberation Front at labs at the University of Minnesota and the University of California at San Francisco. None of these actions was directed at HIV research in particular, but together they unnerved AIDS activists lobbying for research into new meds to fight the epidemic. Every lifesaving antiretroviral drug, from AZT to last fall's Agenerase, was tested on animals. Critical discoveries in immunology have also been made through animal research. Every compound now in the pipeline, including vaccines, will be tested on animals before it reaches a single human body.

That's why ACT UP/Los Angeles protested a fundraiser last September for Hollywood's favorite antifur brigade, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) -- to the dismay of many peltless, red-ribbon-sporting attendees.

PETA is against all biomedical experimentation involving animals -- even research into life-threatening illnesses, regardless of what protections are in place. In 1989, PETA president Ingrid Newkirk famously remarked that even if animal studies led to a cure for AIDS, "We'd be against it." When contacted by *POZ*, she was unrepentant, saying, "If we could get a cure from animals for my father's heart condition, it wouldn't give me any comfort. Why don't we respect animals as victims, too?" PETA spokesperson Dan Matthews, who is gay, addressed gay community concerns in *USA Today* in 1996 by saying, "Don't get diseases in the first place, schmo." He recently explained to *POZ* that he was referring to an overall approach to stopping the AIDS epidemic, "which should include prevention."

PETA may have learned how to spin some of its PR gaffes, but many AIDS advocates see the group as extremist and a threat to already-diminishing donations for AIDS research. In 1995, after a long fight by AIDS advocates, Jeff Getty of ACT UP/Golden Gate received a baboon bone-marrow transplant, a risky experimental procedure to try to save his failing immune system, and then suffered a campaign of hate mail, hate phone calls and death threats that followed him from the hospital through his recuperation. "I had an animal-rights activist try to kick me in the face at a

press conference," he recalls. "PETA denied that they sent those letters, but they went after me big-time in the press." And while most animal-rights organizations condemned The Justice Department's recent threats of violence, PETA's Newkirk wrote in a November 1999 letter to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "Perhaps the mere idea of receiving a nasty missive will allow animal researchers to empathize with their victims for the first time in their lousy careers."

It is unlikely that the savvy organization uses this strident tone to recruit stars for its cause, since roping in celebs is one of PETA's greatest strengths. Though AIDS may boast Elizabeth Taylor, Sharon Stone and Susan Sarandon, PETA snagged Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington and Alicia Silverstone, all of whom modeled for PETA's high-profile antifur ad campaign. Elizabeth Berkley posed in collard greens for PETA to protest the killing of animals for food. And a cattle call of Hollywood luminaries (Alec Baldwin, Jamie Lee Curtis, Woody Harrelson, Ellen DeGeneres) flanked Paul McCartney last September when limos and SUVs descended on Paramount Studios for one of Tinseltown's most glittery galas, a PETA fundraiser at which McCartney presented an award in the name of his late animal-rights-campaigning wife, Linda.

When he arrived, the "Love Me Do" legend came face- to-face with a group of protesters. "Entertainment-industry types can't support PETA and then don the solidarity ribbons for AIDS, breast cancer and other causes!" ACT UP/LA veteran Peter Cashman shouted at celebs as they entered the fete. "The animal-rights movement is a direct threat to our survival!" He later told *POZ*, "The only thing Hollywood celebrities have had to give up is their fur coats, but they are asking us to give up our lives."

It was a David-vs.-Goliath effort: PETA is a multimillion-dollar organization and ACT UP/Los Angeles has but a few remaining survivors. For ammunition, Cashman depends on "the constant revelations of their extremist agenda, their failure to do much for animals other than make publicity about them, their harassment of individuals and their aid and comfort for animal-rights terrorists."

He also uses the testimonies of PWA Getty and others who have been targets of harassment. Says Getty, "To have one foot in the grave and to see this nonprofit corporation making a living off my back and also letting me know very sincerely that if I died, it would be just fine with them.... I mean, what about humane treatment for people with AIDS?" Unafraid to pit Hollywood's pet causes against each other, Cashman's ACT UP chapter has been zapping PETA since 1996.

Some stars are pricking up their ears. "ACT UP has forced Hollywood to think about this issue more carefully," says Jacquie Calnan, president of Americans for Medical Progress, a group that educates about the necessity of animal research. "Some stars are going public, saying, 'Wait, do I want to be part of this? Was I misled?'" In the past few years, several major publications -- *Los Angeles, Us,* the *Times of London, The Boston Globe* -- reported that PETA's annual budget dropped once it became the target of ACT UP protests. (PETA says that the drop was only slight, from $13.6 million in 1997 to $12.8 million in 1998.)

Two years ago, Alec Baldwin issued a statement saying, "One cannot be 'single issue' when it

comes to medical research," perhaps reflecting his own mother's struggle with breast cancer. Even Paul McCartney began to hedge in 1998, when he told the BBC that "I find out now that there is quite a lot of animal experimentation -- some of it, I suppose, absolutely necessary when you come down to the final tests before people." He later retracted the statement to both the British and the American media, but his solid support for PETA appeared to have cracked.

Last year, Turlington, a model and former PETA spokesperson, told the San Francisco Examiner that "PETA behaves badly and sometimes gets out of line." (Her friend, former PETA model Naomi Campbell, had been publicly derided by the group for wearing fur on a Milan runway.) PETA's most famous defector is Melissa Etheridge, who did an antifur poster for the group in 1995 with her lover, Julie Cypher. "But I was absolutely shocked by all the mail I got afterward," she told *Us* last February. "People from all over the world -- doctors, people fighting AIDS and other diseases -- begged me not to support PETA, because it was against performing medical research on animals." She reconsidered and was soon equating PETA with the Christian Right for imposing its views on others.

"Unless people think the biomedical issue through," Cashman says, "there is no way they are going to support ACT UP over PETA's poster of a cute, lovable puppy. But when you start to ask people whether they think the life of a laboratory mouse is more important than the well-being of a child or a lover, they think twice." While no star besides Etheridge has taken as public an anti-PETA stand, some, such as Kathy Najimy, have struggled with the difficulty of staying committed to both groups, according to her agent, Dominique Appel. "Kathy is for both causes," Appel says, "and sees no problem being for animals and for AIDS-activist rights."

Calnan, of Americans for Medical Progress, thinks differently: "If you embrace the animal-rights tenet that all animal research must be stopped regardless of the benefit, yes, the two positions are incompatible. You cannot develop new treatments and hope for a vaccine without an animal-research component, and all responsible AIDS scientists will agree with that."

Still, even some die-hard AIDS supporters have been swayed by the animal-rights argument. When AIDS crusader Elizabeth Taylor, founding chairman of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), was asked by Larry King in 1996 whether she supported animal research, she answered, "That is a really hard one for me because I am an animal activist. I would rather be tested myself."

Founded in 1980, PETA operates under the simple principle that "animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on or use for entertainment." And over the past decade, PETA has had some major victories: The group was responsible for the closure of the nation's largest horse slaughterhouse and a military lab in which animals were shot; it ended the cruel treatment of animals in thousands of labs. PETA aided in the first conviction of an animal experimenter in the United States on charges of cruelty to animals, the first confiscation of abused research animals and the first Supreme Court victory for animals in labs.

PETA's position is that everything important we've learned about treating AIDS has come not through animal research, but through clinical trials on people. "There is never one way to get

information," PETA's Newkirk explains, "and if you do more than desperately cling to anything you are told by the snake-oil salesman -- in this case, people who were trained to use animals -- you will devote the money to technologically superior, more relevant, people-based, not rat- and monkey-based, research." PETA promotes alternatives such as cell research and computer simulations, which, using complex databases, can analyze molecular structures and imitate the behavior of living organisms.

No doubt about it: PETA has succeeded in bolstering protections for animals used in research, according to John Young, MD, veterinary director at Cedar's Sinai Medical Center in LA. He says that PETA's efforts may have even resulted in overregulation. The 1996 federal Animal Welfare Act, for example, requires that scientists protect the psychological well-being of primates in captivity -- a protection not enjoyed by human subjects. He says that while he's committed to treating research animals humanely, he's unwilling to forego such research. He says that animal research has benefited veterinary medicine, too, producing treatments for cancer and diabetes in dogs and cats, and he says he resents PETA's demonization of animal-loving researchers like himself. "They are dealing in simple lies, whereas we are dealing with a complicated truth."

Young agrees that animals are not the only tool at the disposal of scientists, but argues that they're an essential one: "Computer simulations have their limitations. If we don't understand the biological process, we can't put that model on a computer." There are huge gaps in scientists' understanding of how the body and its immune system actually function. Animals allow researchers to develop treatments and vaccines, even when they're unclear as to the exact mechanism by which they work.

Of course, Cashman says, "It is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain on animals." But in PETA's world, there is no middle ground. Using animals to test the next generation of HIV treatments is as unconscionable as using animals to test nail polish. Newkirk frames her fight for animal rights in all-or-nothing terms, drawing parallels to abolitionists who had to convince slaveholders that black people actually had feelings like maternal love. AIDS activists point out that in a world where HIV is decimating millions, especially in Africa and Asia, using mice -- which account for 90 percent of the animals used in AIDS research -- to save human lives is a trade-off they are willing to make. Newkirk, who in 1983 compared the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust to the slaughter of six billion broiler chickens each year, offers a chilling response: "There is no rational basis for saying a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."

**PETAphile or PETAphobe**

"With every purchase we make a choice. We can either sponsor cruel, needless animal testing that destroys countless lives each year or use our dollars to support companies that [don't] put financial bottom line before the most basic rights of all creatures."

***-- ALICIA SILVERSTONE**, actress and PETA member, PETA consumer guide, October 1999*

"With all the technology we have … we can't figure out how to cure a disease without poking animals? I don't get it. I would prefer that they cure MS by poking me. Test me and it will work for

other humans.”

***-- MONTEL WILLIAMS**, talk-show host living with MS and PETA member, PETA benefit, September 1999*

“I wear leather. I eat meat. The whole thing with [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] ... I just felt I was too young at the time to know what I was getting myself into. They took advantage of me.”

***-- NAOMI CAMPBELL**, supermodel and former PETA member, Montreal Gazette, spring 1997*

“My father died of cancer, and I’ve lost too many friends to AIDS. So I do believe in animals losing their lives to eradicate cancer and AIDS from our lives. I believe in that.”

-- MELISSA ETHERIDGE, rocker and former PETA member, US, August 1997

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