Monkey Business

Jeff Getty talks about life after baboons

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After making headlines (and POZ's April 1996 cover) by undergoing a risky and highly debated baboon bone-marrow transplant in December 1995, Jeff Getty has enjoyed steady good health and continued work as an activist. When speaking with Getty, it's sometimes difficult to tell where his activism ends and his own treatment begins. POZ *checks in with the "baboon guy" as he shares the secrets of his success and sanity.*

I had been using the protease inhibitor Crixivan with AZT and 3TC since the summer of 1995, and I was not responding very well. In October/November 1995, I was just recovering from a near-fatal pulmonary infection. We did the bone-marrow transplant on December 14, and from that day on, I haven't had any significant lung problems. We don't know why my health improved, but it did significantly-I'm about back where I was five years ago.

After the transplant, my viral load went down to a very low or undetectable level for six months. My T-cell count went from around 15 to 78. But it's not likely the transplant is responsible for my improved health. There are a lot of signs pointing to the chemotherapy and a type of radiation therapy called 600 TLI we did before the transplant. That gave me a leg up, and then I started responding to my drugs for the first time. I went off Crixivan this past summer following two nasty bouts of kidney sludge that put me in the hospital. So I got on the Agouron drug Viracept (nelfinavir) and I've been on that ever since.

I'm still on AZT and 3TC. In 1996 my viral load never went above 20,000 so it's been a good year-although my T-cell count is still low at 36.

I was also on growth hormones, which boosted me from 135 pounts to about 155 pounds. I've been working out heavily and combining Oxandrin and low-dose growth hormones. I weigh 175 pounds now. I think PWAs die of wasting-not AIDS or opportunistic infections. The key is keeping the weight at a reasonable level. Protease inhibitors seem like they take your immune system back up a couple of hundred points if you're lucky, but nothing restores an immune system all the way; I don't see these drugs as a complete solution.

The most important things to me are eating right, working out and fighting to get the very best, latest drugs that are available. The answer to my survival is that I live and breathe and study AIDS

research and treatment. I'm doing the research and learning the stuff, and always scouting to see what's coming. I am a volunteer, so I share the information and ideas as well.

I believe this complete process sends a message from the brain to the body: "I want this body to live." It's become the way I live my life; it's how I survive. And as it turned out, a lot of the things we tried didn't work. So why am I still here? It has a lot to do with the psychosomatic component to the immune system. I really took a big risk on this [transplant] thing. I laid down my life on this, and I got lucky. And I got a lot better. I think this must have given my body a very important message-that I'm trying to keep it alive.

We have learned you cannot rescue people-they have to rescue themselves. We'll join their side, and we'll fight with them, but when I call someone and they don't call me back, and I know they're dying, then I know that response means they don't really want to live anymore. We have an old saying out here on the West Coast: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him fuck the fish."

MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DIE

The papio baboon used in Jeff Getty's transplant was male, No. 9825, born in the breeding colony at the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in San Antonio. He was shipped to the University of Pittsburgh and euthanized prior to the bone-marrow extraction, according to Dr. Suzanne Ildstad of the medical school there. The baboon's marrow was ultimately rejected by Getty's system. Ildstad says future transplants are being planned, and a new procedure will spare the animal.

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