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A worthy goal, but bill misguided

By Guest Columnist | GUEST COLUMNISTS

Nearly 4 million Americans are living their lives infected with a deadly virus and 75 percent of them have no idea they are at risk. One day, perhaps very soon, these individuals -- our neighbors, families and friends -- will show symptoms of liver cancer or cirrhosis and only then discover that they have been suffering from hepatitis C. The Institute of Medicine has recently released a report outlining the ominous public-health threat of chronic hepatitis C, much of which is the result of unwitting infection through medically-necessary blood transfusions, leading to 350,000 deaths worldwide each year and infecting more than three to five times as many people in the United States as HIV. It lurks for years without obvious symptoms, disproportionately affecting veterans, black Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders and Latinos. This "silent killer," says the institute, needs to be addressed through education, outreach and development of an effective vaccine.

Unfortunately, there is a bill, the Great Ape Protection Act (H.R. 1326), that is steadily gaining support in Congress. The bill threatens our progress in treating and preventing this disease, and it is adding co-sponsors at a rate as alarming as hepatitis C itself.

While protecting great apes, a group which includes chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, seems a vast remove from the ticking time bomb of chronic hepatitis, the two are intimately related. Currently, chimpanzees are the only experimental animal, except for humans themselves, susceptible to infection with hepatitis C. The Great Ape Protection Act would end the use of chimpanzees in biomedical research, grinding promising studies to a halt and unconscionably delaying the release of anti-viral therapies and a vaccine for chronic hepatitis C.

The number of chimpanzees still used in research is fairly small and subject to rigorous oversight. Numerous laws, regulations and voluntary accreditation organizations govern the humane treatment and environmental enrichment of chimps used in research and ensure that they are retired to a federally-funded sanctuary, where they are housed in social groups and provided with a high level of veterinary care, rather than euthanized.

These animals were critical to development of vaccines for hepatitis A and B and remain important in the quest for hepatitis C countermeasures, as well as the discovery of treatments for malaria, monoclonal antibody therapies for cancer, and prevention of respiratory syncytial virus, which causes life-threatening respiratory conditions in children.

On its surface, the Great Ape Protection Act has strong appeal. Who could argue with protecting our nearest primate cousins, the intelligent and beautiful animals whose survival in the wild remains in precarious balance? Sadly, the bill may unintentionally cause harm, by interfering with research designed to help great apes themselves.

Chimpanzees and gorillas in the wild are threatened by the scourge of Ebola, and malignant malaria was recently identified in both captive and wild gorillas. Solutions to these problems depend on the ability to use apes in research. Even minimally invasive studies on captive populations, involving blood or tissue samples, could be made illegal by passage of the Great Ape Protection Act.

The Institute of Medicine report did not go unnoticed by Congress: its release stimulated a press release from the Congressional Tri-Caucus promoting the Viral Hepatitis and Liver Cancer Control and Prevention Act (H.R. 3974) which, among other provisions, calls for additional research on a chronic hepatitis C vaccine. Ironically, nearly every sponsor of this legislation is also a co-sponsor of the Great Ape Protection Act, including Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.), who introduced the bill and has been a strong advocate for hepatitis research.

The time has come for Congress to connect the dots and realize that co-sponsorship of the Great Ape Protection Act is denying hope to millions of Americans, tragically unaware that an innocent-sounding bill about apes could mean the difference between life and death.

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