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Interview with Theo Capaldo

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published October 19, 2013

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **THEO CAPALDO** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 197.*

JASMIN: Today on our podcast we have the incredible Dr. Theo Capaldo. And Dr. Capaldo, of course, is the brilliant force behind the New England Antivivisection Society. And not only are we interviewing her today, but you don't want to miss Dr. Capaldo's feature, which is coming onto our online magazine over at [ourhenhouse.org](#) this Tuesday, October 22. And if you just go to [ourhenhouse.org](#), and if it's maybe not even remotely near the time that we're airing this and you want to find it, just search for "Dr. Capaldo" in our little search bar and her piece will come up. And it's really about having hope for the future, and it's talking about vivisection and why we need to be caring about vivisection, why animal rights activists need to rally behind this cause. And today, Dr. Capaldo's going to talk to us a bit more about vivisection and about all of the efforts of her organization, the New England Antivivisection Society, which is a very old organization, she's gonna tell us about that. And I'm just so thrilled and honored to talk to Dr. Capaldo today.

Dr. Theodora Capaldo is a licensed psychologist as well as President and Executive Director of the New England Antivivisection Society. She spearheads its Ethical Science Education Coalition and Project R&R, Release and Restitution for Chimpanzees in US Laboratories. And she is trustee of the American Fund for Alternatives to Animal Research. Dr. Capaldo has presented at national and international conferences, coauthored several papers in peer-reviewed journals, has been the subject of various media outlets, and has provided expert assistance to documentaries, articles, and books on animal research. Visit the New England Antivivisection Society online at [www.neavs.org](#).

Welcome to Our Hen House, Dr. Capaldo!

DR. CAPALDO: Well, thank you for having us, and for doing what you're doing.

JASMIN: Well, thank you for doing what you're doing. You've been doing it for a long time, and we've been following your work for a long time. And we're very, very excited to have you onto our show to discuss an issue that we need to discuss more often. Let's start with this. What do you mean when you say "NEAVS fights science with science"?

DR. CAPALDO: That's a great opening question because first of all, we're 117 years old, so when you say we've been doing it a long time, you've got that right. And I feel every minute of it, so we have really – we have--our organization and antivivisection work was spurred by

sort of a compassionate heart. But in 2013, we're very fortunate to be able to have a body of scientific evidence that basically shows we've been right all along. It's not the way to go. It's not only inhumane and unethical; it's unnecessary and nonproductive. So, what NEAVS does -- you know, we hired PhD level scientists or consultants in various fields because what we believe is, you have to say things 27 different ways to have 27 different people really understand what you're saying. So, while we certainly think we should and could win the battle on ethical and humane concerns because the abuses are so egregious, we also know that without the scientific data that shows how unnecessary it is, even caring people end up saying, "I reluctantly endorse animal research because what are we gonna do? I don't want my uncle to die, I don't want my daughter to be sick." And we're able to say to them now, "You don't have to worry about that. In fact, the more we replace animals, the better science we will get for human health."

MARIANN: I think that's so fascinating, and I think it's something that really a lot of work has to be done to help that seep into the public consciousness. But it's so similar to what's happened on the farm animal side, I think, that people used to think you needed meat to survive and now they understand they don't. And it's really interesting that you are able to make that same case for animal research. Can you tell us a bit about Project R&R?

DR. CAPALDO: Well, we try to be strategic in how we approach issues around animals in research because in all honesty, going after one egregious experiment after another is not necessarily the way we're gonna dismantle the industry. So, one of the strategies that we've got is, we have to break that species barrier. We have to find a way to find one species that we can show is scientifically flawed, limited, or even dangerous, and that might have a shot to be able to be afforded the same protections that humans are afforded in research. And we figured the chimpanzee was the ideal species to go to because they're so genetically similar to us. We're more closely related to them genetically and they to us than either of us are to any other species. So, we're closer to chimps than gorillas are. If we can show scientifically how unproductive, invalid, limited, and even dangerous using that close a species is, that's a win.

Secondly, humans can relate to chimpanzees. They're like us, and we are after all narcissistic. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way, but I mean, we tend to be the most empathic toward things that are the most like us. We're likely to protect our family before -- the average person -- more likely to protect their family than to protect somebody across the globe, more likely to help a neighbor than to protect blah blah blah. So, if we could also find a species that the public says, "oh yes, yes, yes, they're deserving of the kinds of protections that humans are afforded," we saw it as a win-win.

So, we launched Project R&R, which was really what spearheaded the national effort and the amazing results that all of these organizations working, not necessarily together, but on the same goal, have been able to sort of bring forth in the last seven to ten years, including sanctuaries. We could not have done it without the sanctuaries that had chimps rescued from research. It's been an extraordinary campaign. And in all honesty, what I want to do next is a campaign that sounds something like, "What's so special about chimpanzees?" And that's a kind of tongue-in-cheek opening line for why we focused on them, why we saw them as sort of a keystone species, through which we could start to open the door for both the scientific argument against the use of other animals as well as the emotional argument, that they suffer severely psychologically. Well, so don't monkeys. They have long lasting

effects from confinement in use in research. Well, so don't dogs. So, we think we have really sort of pushed forth a door. We've opened a door. And I think we can finally really start to do antivivisection work with the full force of the science and the empathy behind it.

JASMIN: That's a really, really interesting point. What would you say is the current status of chimpanzee research, and what remains to be done there?

DR. CAPALDO: Well, the United States, when we launched the campaign, we were the only remaining country that -- we weren't, we've used the term we're using, whole scaled use of chimpanzees in research, when in fact that's not entirely accurate. We had a whole scale population of chimpanzees in laboratories, but when we started to delve into the research, who was doing it, what was happening, we already saw a major decline in the use of chimpanzees. And what we saw instead was that laboratories were starting to warehouse them. The housing and maintenance grants were generous, not a bad day's pay to hose a cage down and feed them some monkey chow and maybe a fresh fruit or vegetable once or twice a week. So, we knew that the scientific community itself was already turning away from the chimpanzee as a model. The biggest debacle was HIV. That's why we bred so many chimpanzees. We thought, oh, here's the magic bullet. They were useless in understanding HIV or AIDS. In fact, a scientist said, "Quite frankly I can't tell you what it is we learned from chimpanzees." So, we saw that. We saw that scientifically flawed model. We saw how expensive it was. We saw the laboratories' motivation in keeping that model alive. And we thought, this is a good target. This is something that is representative of all of the problems in animal research and funding. And we're gonna use it as a pivotal point to just keep moving everything forward.

MARIANN: And where are we now? Would you say it's over for chimpanzees in research, or are there still some lingering effects?

DR. CAPALDO: It's a little like an alien movie. Once you think you've really sort of destroyed the virus or the alien, it reappears. I think that's where we're at right now, they're not going down easily. The lab directors, there's a couple in particular, are trying to argue this side of the argument and that side of the argument to keep their monetary hold on this population of chimpanzees. However, the National Institutes of Health, upon the recommendation of the Institute of Medicine, which is one of the highest scientific authorities in our country, have decided to retire a full 90% of the NIH chimpanzees and to no longer fund chimpanzee research, maintenance, etc. Now, they're keeping 50, and they do have certain criteria that would allow them to accept applications and fund projects that met that criteria. In all honesty, it's a little of a saving face kind of phenomenon. They could've retired 100% with not only no negative impact on human health, but nothing but a positive impact. So, as far as NIH owned chimpanzees, it's done. 90% of them will be retired. NIH has firmly come out and essentially said, "We're not gonna breed them anymore, we're not gonna pay for them anymore, and we're gonna retire 90% of our population. But just in case, we'll keep 50 in reserve."

Now, the private sanctuaries, if they're starting -- I mean, I'm sorry, the privately held chimpanzees in laboratories, the privately owned chimpanzees in laboratories, they're gonna start to divest themselves of them if those research grants just aren't there. There are a couple of facilities already that are trying to find a placement for a population of privately owned chimps because they see the federal funding drying up. So, it's gonna take time, and it's gonna take time in part because the status quo wants to hold onto the status

quo. It's kinda like, "don't bother me with the facts. I've been earning a living this way." So, we still have some battles ahead of us, but in all honesty we've won a lot of the battles even if the war isn't over.

MARIANN: Yeah, that's great to hear, and that really clarifies for me what's been going on. And you mentioned sanctuaries before and clearly sanctuaries have been enormously important in this effort to get chimpanzees out. Can you talk a little bit about the role of sanctuaries in NEAVS's work?

DR. CAPALDO: Sure. Well, see, in 2000, the Chimp Act was passed, and a lot of us, including NEAVS, ended up not supporting it, though we had originally because they said, "well we can call them back into research if we need to." And one of the accomplishments of this campaign was that we had closed that gap. But with that in mind, the Chimp Act actually said, "here is a species that deserves to be retired and sent to sanctuary when we no longer need them in research." Now that was a first. We don't have an opportunity to fund that many rescues from research because most of the animals don't make it out alive, period. Chimpanzees did, so there was a population of about 300 chimpanzees from the Laboratory for Experimental Medicine and Surgery in Primates, from the Colston's Foundation, from the United States Air Force.

And all of the chimps that started to get retired to Chimp Haven after the Chimp Act was passed, we had a population of survivors. We had individuals whose stories we could tell, individuals who showed us their scars, physically, emotionally. We enlisted them. In fact, Project R&R actually named Tom, a chimpanzee who had lived at Fauna prior to his death, we named him our ambassador. And we told Tom's story, and we told Jeannie's story, and we told about the suffering that they not only endured, but the lifelong implications of it psychologically and physically. There wasn't a day in his life that Tom didn't gag every morning when he woke up. Was it from intubations? Was it from some experimental procedure he had been in? Upon autopsy, we saw it. The inside of Tom was all fused together. His trachea was hardened. If you're intubated 400 times, and probably roughly because, remember, they're in a hurry. They've knocked somebody down with a dart gun. That was and still is the standard way to anesthetize a chimpanzee, or this other horrible thing called the squeeze cage, which they use with other animals as well, where the back wall of the cage comes forward, pinning the chimpanzee up against the front bar so you can inject them.

JASMIN: Oh, God.

DR. CAPALDO: Can you imagine how terrifying? They scream, they defecate, and they endure what -- I'm a psychologist and I've worked with a lot of human patients who have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. And the key is not only repeated threat of injury or death, but also that powerlessness to do anything about it. So, you can survive a fairly traumatic event and come out stronger for it 'cause you were able to protect yourself or get out of the situation or rescue yourself and others. But when that abuse, when that victimization is repeated, relentless, and you are powerless against it, you develop what we call post-traumatic stress disorder. And the chimps that I met at Fauna Foundation, they were suffering, many of them were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, I said to Gloria one time when she was telling me about Jeannie and Rachel, in particular. I said, "Gloria, if they were humans, I would absolutely as a psychologist say, post-traumatic stress disorder." They were hyper vigilant, they were fearful, they self-mutilated through

over grooming. Many of them were anorexic or had gone through periods of anorexia. They were unable to really socialize again in any really gratifying way. Jeannie, for example, hated anything, *anything* in her sanctuary enclosure changed. That's a classic symptom of somebody suffering from PTSD: Don't give me any new stimulation to have to deal with, I'm coping as best I can.

So, we had these stories and we came to know and love these chimpanzees, not just because we care about animals but because we knew them as individuals. We embraced them. And they are part of the reasons -- they're not even part of the reasons; they *are* the reason why the campaign was so successful, because we got to talk on their behalf. We got to say, "This is what happened to me." And it was for naught. Tom was used in a lot of hepatitis research. Jeannie was used in hepatitis and HIV. And all of their suffering had no consequences for human wellbeing. So, the sanctuary and the generosity and the willingness of the sanctuaries -- Fauna, in particular, joined forces very early on back in 2006 or 7. And to be able to work together from the heart and the head so to speak -- we did the science papers, we published them, why they were a debacle in HIV research, how come we never used them in cancer research. And the chimps told their stories, and that grabbed everybody's attention, both of those combinations.

JASMIN: Yeah, the power of individual stories is so other-worldly. It's just incredible to hear you talk about this. It's so unbelievably sad. A lot of our listeners are avid vegans, but maybe they don't know as much about vivisection as they do about farmed animal abuse. Can you talk about the connections between antivivisection work and veganism?

DR. CAPALDO: Well, a couple things: First, clearly, in terms of numbers, as Peter Singer pointed out years ago, the use of animals for food is just egregiously -- you can't even really calculate the numbers. When you think of how many animals are killed each year and the conditions that they live on, you can't even get your head around that really. But in terms of the variety of ways that animals are made to suffer, vivisection takes the lead there, because what is allowed in laboratories is just about anything. And I had somebody from the Mass. Society for Medical Research challenge me on that. She said, "Look at that, you guys say anything goes, you can do anything to an animal in a lab." And I said to her, that's a true statement because once a laboratory protocol, once an experimental protocol, is approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, anything goes. You can fry their little feet on hot plates. You can do things on them without anesthesia 'cause it might interfere with the results. You can do *anything* once the IACUC approves that. So, in terms of the diversity of cruelty, it's almost there's a sadistic quality to much of the research. I'm not saying researchers are by definition sadistic, but to be able to sort of watch that level of suffering and inflict it is still as a psychologist sort of beyond me. And the good news is a lot of researchers are now saying, "I don't want to keep doing this. I can't keep doing this. This is horrible." And interestingly, they're joining forces with us, even if not always visibly so. So, that's one thing.

But here's the interesting thing and I'm getting back to your question. They do agricultural research. There's a lot of research right now going on. It's not biomedical research, but it's research to see how much electric shock can we use on chickens in order to make the meat fall off the bone prior to slaughter or at the slaughter? Here, I got a couple of examples 'cause I thought this was something you and your listeners would be interested in. We've done studies on bovine growth hormones, even though the use of them leads to worse

cases of mastitis, which is essentially kind of a -- well, I guess your readers, your listeners know about it, but it's when the mammary glands get all infected and puffy, and it's extremely painful. And so they do research on it: how much of a growth hormone can we use? What kind of an incidence -- do we have an increase in it, a decrease in mastitis? They've actually done behavioral research on when is it best to remove a baby from its mother, in that it leads to less bawling, less crying at that separation. Should we separate them at birth, or a few days later?

So, research is research. And what our vegetarian and vegan listeners need to know is that we take those issues on as well. When we say "animals in research," we don't mean just biomedical research. We mean all researchers of animals. And once again, to do the kind of egregious research they do on farmed animals, for the sake of higher profits and that's all it's about, in a civilized world, that should be condemned.

MARIANN: So, how does the US stack up amongst other countries? You mentioned vis-à-vis chimpanzees that we were behind almost everybody. How does it stack up in other vivisection issues when it comes to the use of animals in research and testing?

DR. CAPALDO: Well, the United States is the highest consumer of animals for research, okay? And the United States likes to pride itself in being one of the healthiest nations when, when you look at the data, World Health Organization statistics, it really doesn't stack up. We're not a healthy nation, despite the fact that we sacrifice millions and millions of animals at the altar of biomedical research every year. It's still not happening though. Our mortality rates, our morbidity rates. I mean, there are tiny little countries, the last time I looked, Lichtenstein had a better mortality and a lower morbidity rate than the United States of America, with all of our biotechnology, all of our biomedical quote-unquote "advances." So, there's other pieces to the puzzle of how do you keep a nation healthy? And our sacrifice of dollars, taxpayer dollars, animal lives, and time, to animal research is just not getting us where we need to go. And in all honesty, with all of that in place, it's not stacking up to a healthier nation.

And from where I sit, I think the driving force, from all I know about animal research, the driving force is the profit behind it. And when you look at some of the lobbying organizations -- I did a letter to the editor a few weeks ago for the New York Times. And one of the things that I said was, they call themselves names like the Foundation for Biomedical Research when I wish they would call themselves the Foundation for Animal Research, because when you look at the lobbying groups, they're lobbying for animal research. They make it sound like they're lobbying for good research in the United States, but it's animal research. And when you look at who founded these, you'll see that it's the suppliers, the breeders, the equipment suppliers, it's everybody who has an enormous fiscal interest in maintaining the status quo of animal use.

JASMIN: Dr. Capaldo, this is all, this can be very overwhelming for a lot of people to hear. What can people do in their own lives to help stop animal testing and experimentation?

DR. CAPALDO: That's a good question. And a couple things: one, obviously, eat a healthy diet, exercise, the same old, same old, keep yourself healthy. But in the event that you are in need of a medication, one of the questions I always ask any physician I see. I'm on one medication, but I always say, how long has it been on the market? And I personally will not take anything that has not been on the market for 10 years or more, and then I always find

the opportunity to say, because the results of animal testing of this drug have no implication for how it's gonna react in me. Once it's been used by human beings for 10 years, 15 years, and it's not causing a third ear to grow, I will then deem that a safe medication. But I try and make the point that animal testing of drugs is no assurance that that drug will be safe in me. We have examples of animal-tested drugs and FDA-approved drugs based on animal studies that have killed literally tens of thousands of people. So, be careful of the medications you take.

Make sure that your school district allows dissection choice because if it doesn't, that means that we continue to breed a generation of future scientists who are willing to harm animals. We've gotta get these kids in early. I myself would have been a medical doctor and not a psychologist, or actually a veterinarian, and not a psychologist, if I didn't have to pit and dissect a frog. I took physics instead. There went my career in the biological sciences. So, that would be a really good home grown starting place. Make sure your school allows dissection choice, so the future scientists who are compassionate get to stay in science.

Make sure when you buy products, you don't buy products that are tested on animals. Huge, millions of animals are used in product testing every year, totally unnecessary. And that's some of the most egregious kind of testing because essentially you're slowly poisoning an animal to death to try to establish the safety for humans, even though that does not predict safety in a human when a human uses that same drug or product any better than if you had flipped a coin. So, use cruelty-free cosmetics and products get dissection choice in your schools. Give your own doctors the message, "I don't want a drug unless it's been on the market for a long time because animal testing is ridiculous." And then obviously, here's our little pitch. Take a look at NEAVS, see what we're doing, when we're doing it, sign the petitions, write the letters, kind of the same old same old. But spread the word and remind people. If anything, I think this is the takeaway I'd like people to have. Ending animal research will not only not harm your uncle or your grandfather or your son or your daughter or your wife's health. When we end it, we may actually start to finally see the kind of advances at an accelerated rate that are gonna be good for human health. That's the equation people have to start to get.

JASMIN: That's such an important takeaway and such valuable advice. Dr. Capaldo, thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House and for really enlightening us to an issue that is just absolutely dire. We all need to learn more about this issue, and I so appreciate all that you do and your organization, all that it has done for so long. Thanks for joining us.

DR. CAPALDO: Thank you.

JASMIN: That was Dr. Theo Capaldo. Learn more about the New England Antivivisection Society at neavs.org.