Animal activists reacted to the incidents with anger and dismay, calling on the USDA to levy large fines, and asking the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to investigate whether federal grant money was used in support of research that violated federal animal-welfare regulations. They also questioned whether the relatively simple problems that contributed to some of the incidents revealed shortcomings in procedures, training, and staff. “Even someone who is not well trained in veterinary care of animals...at the least, they should be making sure there’s a water bottle on the cage,” said Justin Goodman, associate director of the laboratory investigations department at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

The concern over the situation at the primate center rapidly became a priority at the highest levels of Harvard. Flier intervened directly in the situation, and President Drew Faust said in a statement released in March that she was requesting regular progress reports: “This situation is unacceptable. When I was notified of developments at the primate center over the summer, I found them troubling and fully supported a thorough review of procedures and implementation of reforms.” After the most recent monkey death, she said, she requested weekly reports “specifying ongoing assessment of the sources of difficulties, proposed solutions, and timetables for plans of action.”

Animal research is extremely sensitive; institutions are typically secretive about operations at primate centers, largely from fear of retaliation by extremist animal-rights activists: elsewhere, researchers and facilities have been threatened or bombed. But the secrecy that shrouds the research also tends to fuel animal activists’ suspicions, perhaps even bolstering their arguments that such research, even when it is ethically conducted and overseen, should not be done. “Each and every death is unacceptable. We should be doing all that we can to avoid these cases,” said Kathleen Conlee, senior director for animal research issues at the Humane Society of the United States. “I think what gets lost in the shuffle, to some degree, is the deaths of animals due to research, not just accidents.”

But proponents argue that primate research is necessary—although it should always be held to the highest standards.