

Lord Drayson: Winning the war on animal testing

Lord Drayson, the Science Minister, talks to Richard Gray about the clear shift in public understanding of the need for animal testing.

By Richard Gray

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Laboratory mice Photo: ALAMY

Lord Drayson says he owes a debt of thanks to animal rights extremists.

It may seem a strange admission for a politician, especially one who has been at the heart of the fight to change negative public perceptions of animal testing in Britain for the past 20 years.

In that time, he has seen the toll taken by the campaigns of terror waged by violent protesters on his friends and colleagues, while he has been vilified as an outspoken supporter of animal research.

But, according to Lord Drayson, he owes his current position to the protesters responsible for the threats and violence.

“Animal rights extremism is what truly got me interested in politics,” he explained. “I wouldn’t be sitting here today as the UK’s Science Minister if it hadn’t been for this.

“I was the chief executive of a biotechnology company in the UK when animal rights extremism reached quite nasty levels. Seeing the way individual researchers and companies were targeted by these extremists politicised me as I felt it wasn’t right.”

Lord Drayson was speaking as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills released new figures that reveal how public opposition to scientific and medical research involving animals has fallen by 10 per cent in the past 10 years.

A survey conducted by Ipsos MORI shows that just a third of British adults would like a ban on animal experimentation, while the number of people who now unconditionally accept the need for animal research has increased by 28 per cent since 1999.

It comes at a time when the use of animals in experiments has reached an all-time high. Nearly 3.7 million experiments were performed on animals last year, a rise of 454,000, or 14 per cent, on the previous year.

“The picture is much better now,” said Lord Drayson. “I think we have made and won the argument, but we have to continue to make the argument.”

But despite this clear shift in public opinion, scientists and other researchers who work with animals still feel nervous about speaking publicly about their work. Last week, more than 400 scientists and animal-research technicians gathered for a conference. Many of the speakers wished to remain anonymous on the conference programme, while the location of the meeting was not publicly announced. The Institute of Animal Technology, which organises the conference, often struggles to find hotels or conference centres willing to host the event because of the fear of bad publicity.

The reasons for this cautiousness are clear. Animal rights extremists have targeted the pharmaceutical industry, animal-testing companies and individual scientists with a wave of violence, vandalism and threats. Activists have performed late-night raids on testing facilities, and have vandalised cars and homes belonging to those involved in animal research. Researchers have received death threats, while others have been attacked with pickaxe handles, and company executives have been targeted with firebomb attacks.

In one notorious incident, the body of an elderly woman was stolen from her grave as part of a campaign against a family who ran a firm that bred guinea pigs for medical research.

When Lord Drayson, who has a PhD in robotics and in 1993 co-founded a biotechnology company that specialised in developing vaccines, saw the impact of the tactics being employed by animal rights activists first hand, he knew that he had to make a stand.

He said: “I remember very clearly an incident where a colleague of mine at another company received a telephone call in the night.

“The person on the other end said: ‘We know where your young daughter gets the bus in the morning. It would be terrible if something awful happened to her... you really want to stop doing these animal experiments.’

“For me, that made me think, enough is enough. I had a young family myself, and it struck me that there was a completely unbalanced view from the people who were prepared to start threatening other people’s children.”

Lord Drayson became the chairman of the BioIndustry Association, the biotechnology trade body heading the industry’s campaign to combat animal rights extremism.

Amid fears that pharmaceutical companies would leave the UK to set up business in other countries, in 2004 the Government introduced new measures to crack down on extremism. A special police unit was set up to co-ordinate action against extremist groups. A number of high-profile activists has now been jailed and, according to Lord Drayson, the overall impact has been to help scientists become more open about the work they do with animals.

He also expresses some exasperation at the cosmetics industry, which he believes, must take responsibility when it comes to impacting on public opinion.

He said: “One of the important misunderstandings has grown up in the past, because of the way cosmetics were marketed as not being tested on animals. While they may not be, they are made up of mixtures of known substances that have already been tested on animals to ensure that they are safe.

“Marketing people need to be very careful and show some responsibility by not creating a differentiating factor using an unbiased fear.

“Despite the work that is going on to find alternatives, at the moment it is not possible to ensure the efficacy and safety of new medicines without using animals. It is a legal requirement to carry out animal testing to ensure they are safe and effective.

“We have a duty to explain that. If we are open with people and the more we engage with the general public, the more the extremists will lose the argument.”

According to opponents of animal research, however, this reasoning is flawed. They claim that animals can never provide an accurate model of the human body and so drugs tested on animals will often not have the same effects on human patients. Indeed, large numbers of candidate drugs fail during clinical trials after showing promise in animal trials – in the US, just 11 per cent of drugs that begin phase one clinical trials are eventually licensed for use in patients.

Over the past five years, the Government has invested £80 million in research aimed at finding alternatives to animal testing through the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research.

But with a pharmaceuticals industry in the UK worth more than £150 billion, this amount is too little for groups who want to see an end to animal testing.

Carol Newman, grants and research director at the Dr Hadwen Trust, a charity that funds research into alternatives to animal testing, said: “We are opposed to animal research for both ethical and scientific reasons. Results from animals are unreliable when it comes to finding out information about humans, so we would like to see more advanced methods being used. There are already good alternatives, such as computer models, tissue engineering and non-invasive imaging technology, that allows us to see what is going on inside the human body.”

Regulation of animal experimentation in the UK is one of the strictest in the world. Laboratories where animals are used must conform to a raft of rules and are inspected regularly by the Home Office. New regulations from the European Union are expected to come into force later this year that will place further restrictions on the types of animals that can be used.

The directive will prevent animal-testing laboratories from using animals which have been captured from the wild, while it will also place new restrictions on the use of primates, octopus and squid in animal experiments.

The impact of these new rules was one of the topics under discussion at the conference organised by the Institute of Animal Technology last week – many scientists fear essential work on neurodegenerative conditions, such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease, will be affected.

Despite concerns over the increasing bureaucracy and cost of carrying out animal research, few scientists doubt the improvements in animal welfare that have resulted from stricter regulation of vivisection in recent years.

Some laboratories have improved the quality of life for the animals they keep. One company in Oxford has installed swings, paddling pools and climbing frames for its macaque monkeys – the kind of accessories more often associated with animal enclosures at zoos.

Dr Robin Lovell-Badge, president of the Institute of Animal Technology and a stem-cell expert at the National Institute for Medical Research in London, said that the old image of animals kept in barren rows of cages was no longer the case.

“There has been some big advances in the way that animals are kept,” said Dr Lovell-Badge. “The happier an animal is, the more likely there is to be an experimental result. There has been some work on training macaques to respond to verbal cues so that they will take hold of an animal technician’s hand, making it easier to handle them rather than having to grab hold of the animal and tie it down.

“It is also worth remembering that the people who are doing this work find it hard. They are committed to science, but they also get attached to their animals.”

Experiments on animals range from small procedures, such as taking blood and tissue samples, to genetic manipulation and invasive surgery.

But with an expanding biomedical research industry, mainly driven by advances in genetics, the number of animals involved in research is likely to grow. The scientific community is still fearful that they may face a return to the days when extremism was at its worst.

But, says Lord Drayson, the time has come for the public to ask some tough questions about animal research.

“People need to ask themselves: 'Do I want that medicine to be on the shelf and available when my child, or my grandmother or myself are faced in a few years time with these nasty diseases?' If that answer is 'yes', then I'm afraid we need to carry on doing this work.

“To be absolutely clear with people, at the current level of medical science, it is not possible, regrettably, to ensure a medicine is safe and effective without doing this testing on animals.”