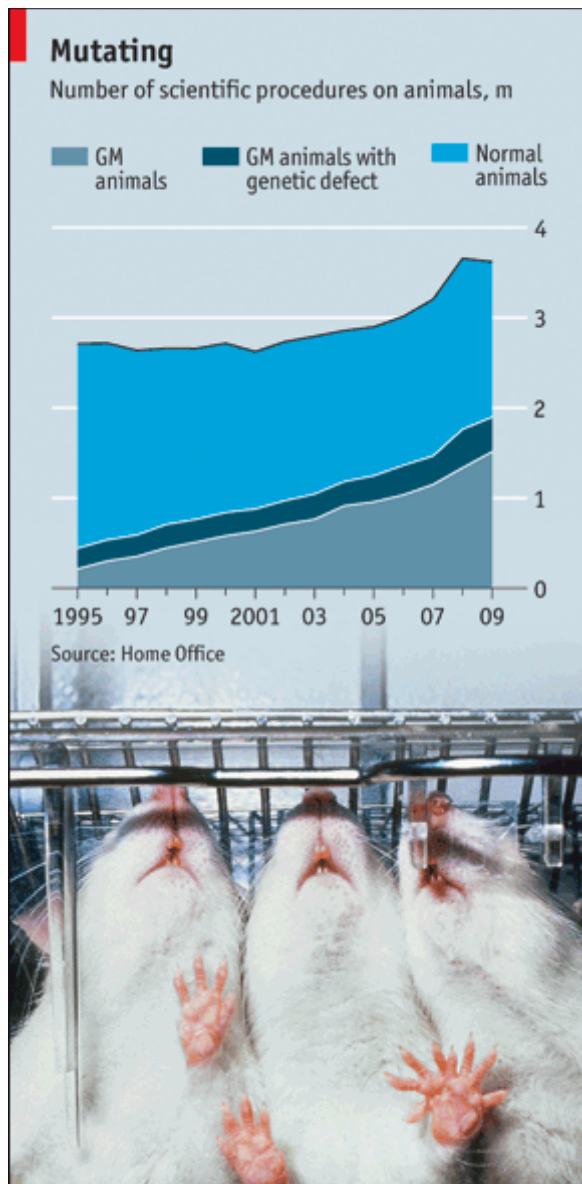


Animal testing

Tweaking the experiments

Most people now accept the growing use of genetically modified mice

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THE British are notorious for preferring pets to people. They dislike the genetic modification of crops. Yet over the past decade they have come to accept not only that animal experimentation

can often be justified but also the increased use of genetically modified mice in carrying out such tests. On July 27th official statistics showed that, for the first time, the use of genetically modified animals has outstripped that of conventional creatures. Hardly anyone flinched.

For a nation of animal-lovers, Britain conducts a lot of experiments on living beings—some 3.6m in 2009, of which 83% involved rodents. The numbers peaked in the early 1970s at 5.5m, then halved over the next two decades as the sorts of experiments that make even pro-science types wince were halted. All experimenting on great apes was stopped, and the use of animals to test cosmetics and household products was phased out.

Since 2000, however, the ability to breed genetically modified mice that can be used to study the genetic basis of diseases—including cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's—has boosted the total number of experiments almost every year. It fell back slightly in 2009, probably due to the recession, but is expected to rise again.

At the same time, the public seems to be growing increasingly tolerant of using animals in research. A series of surveys by Ipsos MORI, a polling company, found the proportion of people who agree that animal testing should be allowed in any experiment where there is no valid alternative doubled to more than half over the decade to 2009. Moreover, more people than before are now strongly in favour of animal experimentation. The researchers attribute the trend to a strengthening of support for science in general.

Attention-grabbing protests by extremists who oppose animal testing have waned over recent years, thanks mostly to the work of a specialised police unit. The National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit, established in 2004, has overseen the arrest and subsequent jailing of several hard-core extremists, including three who were convicted of stealing for ransom the corpse of the mother-in-law of a man who bred guinea pigs for research.

The attacks have not completely ceased. The most recent arson suspected to be the work of animal-rights agitators took place on July 19th at Highgate Farm in Lincolnshire, which breeds rabbits for use in developing vaccines for people, pets and livestock. On July 13th a judge confirmed the ten-year jail sentence given to an extremist for planting petrol bombs at the University of Oxford, which has opened a new biomedical-sciences laboratory. Overall, though, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, which keeps tabs on such things, reports that illegal activities by extremists are down to 20 incidents a year from a peak of 615 in 2004.

Other reforms give some succour to those seeking to reduce animal suffering. At long last countries have begun to accept the results of toxicology tests conducted elsewhere, so these need not be repeated in multiple jurisdictions. One result is that most animal experiments now take place in universities and medical schools rather than in pharmaceutical and chemical companies. Recent European Union legislation requiring chemicals in common use to be proven safe to use, however, may yet reverse the trend.