

Public turns on animal terrorists

By Philip Johnston Home Affairs Editor

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Your view: [Are animal rights activists terrorists?](#)

Extremist behaviour by animal rights protesters has had the effect of increasing public support for testing new medical treatments on animals, a poll for The Daily Telegraph has found.

The proportion of people who approve of animal testing is now at an all-time high and more than three quarters believe that the more fanatical activists can justifiably be defined as "terrorists".

High-profile campaigns, such as intimidating scientists and threatening shareholders in pharmaceutical companies, appear to have backfired badly.

The YouGov survey suggests that fewer than one person in five considers animal testing to be unacceptable in any circumstance.



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More than 70 per cent said they accepted that experimentation on animals was sometimes essential because alternative methods were unavailable.

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There was also widespread concern that a ban on medical research on animals would merely encourage pharmaceutical multi-nationals to set up abroad, where the safeguards that exist in Britain against causing unnecessary suffering may be absent.

The findings appear to contradict the claims often made by opponents of animal testing that there is "overwhelming" public support for their cause. While people might prefer not to see animals suffer, just 19 per cent took the view that alternative methods of testing were always available.

Brian Cass, the managing director of Huntingdon Life Sciences, an animal-testing research company which has been the target of activists for several years, said: "The issue has had so much publicity that organisations like ourselves have gone out of our way to provide an almost open laboratory to the media.

"This has brought a much more open presentation of both how animal testing is done and the legal requirements that control it. Once people understand what is going on they are in a much better position to form objective judgments. When they do so they tend to support the work."

Previous polls have shown opinion more or less evenly divided on animal testing.

YouGov's findings indicate that by stepping up their campaign, extremists have damaged their cause. While most people have no objection to campaigners staging peaceful demonstrations, they draw the line at some of the activities seen in recent years.

There was strong support for the 12-year jail terms [given this month](#) to three extremists who had been involved in a campaign of intimidation, including the disinterment of the body of a woman whose family bred animals for experimentation.

Opposition to threats, hate campaigns and vandalism is almost universal and 88 per cent believe it is wrong to post the names and addresses of people connected with animal testing on the internet.

Alistair Currie, the campaigns director of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, said extremists had not helped the animal rights cause.

"It has produced an image problem for the animal rights movement as a whole," he said. "But that doesn't necessarily mean people are more committed to animal rights experiments that they were previously."

The findings suggest that Tony Blair was very much in tune with public opinion when he took the unusual step of agreeing to sign a petition affirming support for the right of scientists to conduct legitimate animal experiments.

He also said that the Government would consider a new law to protect the identities of those involved in testing.

His move came amid [continuing protests in Oxford](#) against plans for a new medical research laboratory at the university and complaints that despite a few high-profile prosecutions, the police are not doing enough to disrupt the activities of known extremists.

Part of the reason for changing public attitudes could be an appreciation that animals are no longer used to test cosmetics in Britain, though the number of tests for medical purposes is rising. In 2004, there were around 2.85 million "procedures", a rise of just over two per cent on the previous year.

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