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Scientists share thoughts on animal research

Poll reveals nuanced views among biomedical researchers.

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An anonymous online poll of nearly 1,700 Nature researchers has revealed intriguing insights into what scientists think about the use of animals in research.

The results of the poll, conducted by Nature, suggest that biomedical researchers around the world have a range of opinions regarding the use of animals from finding it essential to unnecessary but feel that pressures from the animal rights movement and others makes it difficult to voice opinions in public.

It can even be hard, some said, to express nuanced opinions (such as the idea that most, but not all, animal research is strictly essential) within the community of researchers, let alone with the public.

"I am more concerned that the scientific community, rather than the animal rights movement, makes it difficult to voice a nuanced opinion on animal research," said one neuroscientist, who studies human volunteers. "I think there is an unwillingness among the community to ask itself hard questions."

Many commented that scientists needed to engage more with the public and discuss animal research more openly. Less than half of those involved in animal research, however, said they did so.

"Certainly, the presence of activism has had a very negative effect on both the scale of the debate and the quality of the debate," says Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive Officer of Britain's Medical Research Council, in response to the poll findings. Blakemore, who has been the target of attacks by extremists, adds: "The evidence is that the people who speak out don't suffer for doing so. I wish we could get that message across because it might encourage more to become involved publicly in this discussion."

Most respondents said they simply hadn't had the opportunity to interact with the public. For some this could be partly due to the attitudes of their employers. Whereas most respondents said their institution had not voiced a preference about how they communicated with the public, less than a third of researchers working on animals said they had received encouragement or help in doing so. A small minority (about 11%) reported that their institution discouraged them from talking.

Snapshot

Nature's poll was not intended to be a rigorous scientific study, nor is it thought to be representative of all biomedical researchers. Its aim was simply to gain a snapshot of the opinions of a community that is notoriously reluctant to speak on the record about this controversial issue (click here to download the full poll results in a word document).

Readers registered to access Nature online, and who identified themselves as biomedical scientists, were invited to participate anonymously in the poll. A total of 1,682 people from all over the world responded, the majority from Europe and North America.

About half said they worked on animals; more than 80% of these worked on mice and rats. Most said they had no ethical misgivings about the role of animals in their work. Many commented that this was because their work conformed to high ethical and welfare standards and there was no viable alternative.

The fifth or so who did have misgivings often spoke of having conflicting feelings. "As a researcher in the field of HIV vaccine development, I am placed in a very awkward position," said one immunologist. "I personally feel uncomfortable with primate research, yet I realize that without primate data, vaccine candidates are rarely forwarded to human trial."

Viewpoint

When asked to rate how necessary animal research was for progressing biomedical science on a scale of 1 (not at all necessary) to 4 (essential), three quarters of all respondents, including those who do not work with animals themselves, said it was essential. About a fifth rated it as 3, and only a tiny minority (about 1%) thought it unnecessary.

Many noted that a main difficulty in discussing animal research is in dealing with the fact that some animal models aren't perfect. "We have not addressed legitimate issues that animal rights groups have raised, ...a mouse is not a human and the question to be tested will not be fully answered," said one neuroscientist, who works on animals. "We need to admit this but point out that it is more complex than that."

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