

Public opinion test for animal research



Has public opinion switched to supporting scientific research against the tactics of anti-vivisection campaigners? Picture: RDS



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It's a controversial subject guaranteed to split opinion, but is it finally time to celebrate animal testing?

For years animal testing has been the medical research truth which dare not speak its name.

While experiments on rats and mice have contributed to innumerable scientific breakthroughs, photographs of chain-smoking beagles sat uncomfortably with our reputation as a nation of animal lovers.

In 1824, some 60 years before anyone decided to set up a charity to prevent cruelty to children,

the RSPCA opened its doors and ever since we have been collective defenders of the furry and the fluffy.

When the research industry refused to toe the line, it gave birth to a wave of opposition and, while the extremists may have been in the minority, as laboratories and the individuals who worked in them became the target of relentless hate campaigns, many wary of becoming the next on the hit list took a vow of silence.

"The fear was that if you put your head above the parapet then you were a sitting target and very few people were prepared to take that risk," says Kirk Leech, from the Research Defence Society, who is trying to lure scientists out of their labs. "Universities worried about reprisals used to erase any mention of animal testing from research papers and academics had to really fight to get their work into the public domain."

While anti-vivisection organisations remained committed to peaceful protests, the extremists grew in stature. In 2004, they claimed victory when Cambridge University shelved plans for a controversial primate experiment centre, citing security costs as one of the reasons.

Later that same year, a building firm pulled out of a contract to build labs at Oxford University after campaigners wrote to shareholders threatening to publicise their involvement in the project. The move caused the company's shares to plummet by 19 per cent in one day, and continued protests against Huntingdon Life Sciences led to a series of firms severing ties with the research centre.

However, it was the six-year campaign against the Newchurch guinea pig farm, which ended in the remains of Gladys Hall being stolen from a churchyard, which some believe proved the turning point. Gladys, was mother-in-law to Christopher Hall, part-owner of the farm, and while the theft, which came after a series of death threats, malicious phone calls, hoax bombs, did force the closure of the farm, it also caused a backlash among even those previously sympathetic to the cause.

"A lot has happened in the last two or three years which has nullified the extremists," says Dr Leech, who has been speaking to researchers at the University of Bradford and Huddersfield about the issues surrounding animal testing.

"The Newchurch body snatchers caused widespread revulsion and made people question exactly what kind of moral world these people were living in.

"It also happened to coincide with an increase in police and prosecution powers. Ten years ago, it was widely thought that if you wanted to inflict real damage on the animal testing industry then you should come to the UK, because the authorities didn't take it seriously. Police would move protesters on, but as soon as they got to the border of their patch they washed their hands of any responsibility. It was a completely uncoordinated response.

"That changed when two of the big pharmaceutical companies went to the Government and threatened to withdraw from the UK unless something was done. If they had carried through with

the threat it would have meant the country's biggest export would have been arms, which wasn't the greatest headline for New Labour."

The new laws meant those found guilty of breaking in to buildings or threatening behaviour faced much stiffer sentences – the four involved in the Newchurch case were jailed for a total of 40 years – and while wary of tempting fate, the RDS says extremist activity is at a 30-year low.

"Four years ago, we were recording 50 home visits by extremists a month," adds Dr Leech. "They would often descend on someone's home and through loud hailer's liken them to Nazi prison camp guards. Now it's down to one or two incidents a month and while it's not about down playing these incidents, it is about putting it into context.

"While protests are continuing against Huntingdon Life Science and the new labs planned at Oxford University, there is now a much more level playing field for debate and we need to make the most of that.

"It's important that anti-vivisection groups exercise their democratic right to oppose animal testing on ethical grounds, but if scientists don't start putting the case for the defence, the debate becomes very one-sided."

Opposition organisations claim animal testing is not only cruel, but, more importantly, unnecessary, with the experiments telling us a lot about mice and rats, but little or nothing about humans. Critics, pointing to the lack of detailed information on the work going on in labs and a reluctance to share data, also insist that new computer modelling technology, which creates virtual cells and organs, makes animal free labs a viable alternative.

"That's just not true," says Dr Leech. "There are definitely developments being made, but it remains hard to imagine a time when animals won't be a part of the research process. There are so many drugs which are now used to treat TB, malaria and HIV and breakthroughs in asthma and cancer that wouldn't be around without animal research. It is an emotive subject, but it has to be balanced with the number of lives we have saved as a result."

Changing public perceptions won't be easy. While a recent YouGov poll put public acceptance of animal testing at 80 per cent – a figure likely to be disputed by anti-vivisection groups – the RDS admits that many still associate the industry with images of rabbits red-eyed from chemical drops.

"Cosmetic testing on animals has been banned in the UK for the last 10 or so years, but it remains a powerful image," says Dr Leech.

"However, I do think the vast majority of people accept that if testing a drug on an animal benefits treatment of humans then it's worth it."

The renewed campaign to get the public behind the industry, which employs directly or

indirectly 500,000 people, comes at a time when animal testing is set to increase.

A directive from the European Union has called for numerous existing household products, which weren't tried on animals, to be tested in retrospect. That, together with ongoing work in the field of genetic engineering, which produced the infamous mouse with an ear on its back, could yet test the public's resolve

"Things are changing. The Science Media Centre once had only five scientists who were prepared to speak about animal testing, now it has 150," says Dr Leech. "We have to be aware that with some of the work which is going on at the moment there is the Frankenstein element, which can appear quite disturbing, but we also have to make the public aware that this is one of the most tightly regulated industries.

"A couple of years ago, two employees at a Bernard Matthews factory were filmed playing baseball with live turkeys, but that kind of behaviour simply couldn't happen in laboratories.

"Researchers can't just do what they like and I think people would be amazed if they knew how many forms have to be filled in just to bring the end to the life of one mouse."

No amount of red tape is going to change the mind of committed anti-vivisectionists, but if the RDS can convince scientists that it is good to talk we may all be finally able to listen to both sides of the argument.

ANIMAL RESEARCH – THE FACTS

In 2006, the number of animals used in testing topped the three million mark for the first time.

Rats, mice and other rodents account for 83 per cent of animals used in research laboratories. Fish, amphibians and reptiles account for 14 per cent, while the other three per cent is made up of rabbits, ferrets, sheep, cows, pigs, dogs, cats and monkeys. Chimpanzees, orang-utans and gorillas have not been used in this country for more than 20 years and their use is now banned.

Just under a third of all animal testing is related to genetics, a similar number is related to the treatment or prevention of disease, and a further 31 per cent is to do with how organs work. The remaining six per cent includes the testing of products such as pesticides.

The Research Defence Society believes testing will result in further advances in the treatment of cancer, cystic fibrosis and crippling joint disease.

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