

A vet responds to the latest UK government figures on animal experiments

According to the Guardian newspaper of 21 July, the number of medical experiments involving animals has shown its largest rise since modern records began in 1986. The official government explanation for this massive increase in animal use, is an expansion in biomedical research and the development of new drugs. According to the Home Office, the 3.7 million experiments that took place in 2008 were all “ethically justified”.

But how is society to judge whether these animal experiments are genuinely “ethically justified”? We are told that any research proposal involving living animals is first subject to approval by a local ethical review committee. The review panel is formed largely of scientists employed by the institution where the animal research will be conducted. There may, or may not, be lay persons on these panels. However, assuming that a lay person or animal welfare representative is present, that individual will be hard pressed to challenge the aims of a complex animal study, much less suggest a non animal replacement. Alternatively, a lone lay person will be out voted by the rest of the panel. Once a study proposal has been passed by an ethical review committee, it will almost certainly receive Home Office approval, with an occasional request for very minor adjustments, for good measure.

As an animal loving democratic society, we do not rely solely on the ethical review process. Other safeguards exist to prevent any “unethical” animal experimentation from taking place, the most important of which is the Scientific Procedures Act 1986. More specifically, paragraph 5(5) of the Act states that “The Secretary of State shall not grant a project licence unless he is satisfied - that the purpose of the programme to be specified in the licence cannot be achieved satisfactorily by any other reasonably practicable method not entailing the use of protected animals”.

But how will we, as members of the general public know whether a non animal method exists? The only objective way to find out is to challenge the project licence holder with a suitably qualified scientist in the same field of research, who does not use animals. This idea sounds logical and fairly straightforward to most people. But there are a few catches. The first, is that a non animal scientist would be forbidden by most institutions, from speaking openly against an animal researcher. The few scientists who have been courageous enough to challenge the system have found themselves ostracised by their peers and subjected to “institutional intimidation” at their places of work. So much for true academic freedom.

The second catch is equally Orwellian. Although the law appears to accommodate the possibility of a non animal replacement, in practice, this is virtually impossible to achieve. In order to challenge an animal experiment, the UK legal system requires an individual to apply for a “judicial review”. A judicial review in effect challenges the validity of the 1986 Act. Previous attempts involving judicial review demonstrate the difficulties in trying to take on the UK legal system. One requires very little imagination to predict with whom the judge will side when presented with evidence by two scientific experts, one representing an antivivisection group, and the other, the

Home Office. As an added measure to dissuade trouble makers, losing such a case will result in court costs of around £100,000. So much for true justice.

As a last resort, we can try to cling to the section in the law that refers to “cost-benefit” analysis. Paragraph 5(4) of the 1986 Act states that “In determining whether and on what terms to grant a project licence the Secretary of State shall weigh the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned against the benefit likely to accrue as a result of the programme to be specified in the licence.” However, even that thin veil of protection falls away, as attested to by an official Home Office reply addressed to me dated 18th September 2006, which stated that “The 1986 Act does not require that benefit outweighs cost”.

A 1.5 million strong petition was recently handed in to Downing Street by the campaign group Uncaged, calling on the UK government to develop a “road map” to make animal experimentation history. Will the government continue to ignore public sentiment as it did five years ago, when Caroline Flint admitted that the Home Office “has not commissioned or evaluated any formal research on the efficacy of animal experiments and has no plans to do so”? The time is long overdue for a transparent and independent evaluation of the efficacy of animal experiments.

The development and application of non animal methods has more to do with political will than with scientific innovation. We no longer live in the 18th century. The cosmetics industry is a good example of how scientists can rise to the challenge of devising non animal testing strategies when motivated to do so by commercial imperative. The same non animal methods used in the cosmetics industry can be applied to the pharmaceutical industry.

A non animal test for the replacement of mice for batch release of Botox was developed in 1999 by the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control (NIBSC), yet it sits on a shelf because commercial companies are under no legal obligation – or public pressure - to replace the use of mice. There are countless other glaring examples like this, involving rats, dogs, rabbits, monkeys and other animals. Political inertia - not science - is the stumbling block. A lack of funding for non animal methods is another red herring. The global pharmaceutical industry was estimated to be worth over US \$660bn in 2008. Of its expenditure, 33 per cent goes on sales and marketing, and just 17 per cent on research and development. No shortage of money there.

The current situation is unbearable, unsustainable and most of all, unjust. Not only do animals suffer and die in their millions, but the drugs and chemicals passed as safe on the back of animal testing, turn out to cause some serious health problems in people. How else does one explain the fact that babies born today contain as many as 200 toxic chemicals in their bodies? Something is terribly wrong with our testing system, much of it based on animal experiments. It is time for government, industry and society to act together to correct the damage.

“A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame, as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right, as well as reality” (John F. Kennedy, Civil Rights Address delivered 11 June 1963).

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