



Cancer – A personal perspective

Helen Marston, CEO, Humane Research Australia, April 2012.

Lying on a cold table in an unfamiliar place and undergoing a core biopsy was probably one of the most traumatic events of my life. I was frightened, confused, hurting and, yes, I cried – but not just for myself. As I lay there, experiencing a needle digging around inside me and having small pieces of flesh cut from my body, I thought about the animals in laboratories who are subjected to similar experiences. Of course, I had been given some analgesic, the process was explained to me and ultimately it was for my own benefit... not so the case for lab animals.

At the age of 44, having lived a healthy, vegan lifestyle, and not inheriting any history of breast cancer in my family, I never suspected that I would be a victim of this insidious disease. Then again, I'm not invincible and so there's no reason why I should be exempt. But... why? Facing such a daunting situation certainly does make you reassess your life.

Considering the passion I have for my work, one of the main dilemmas I now faced was my ingrained opposition to animal experiments. Did my treatment – if I was to accept it – now mean that I would need to compromise my core values? Would it be hypocritical to expose my body to drugs that I knew involved animal testing at some stage before they came onto the market? Or in fact would I be of better use to refuse such a treatment?

This thought process began during the diagnostic stage. Despite my own fear, I felt so very sorry that – my disease, and that of others in my situation, was the reason that so many animals are routinely subjected to cruel procedures and then merely discarded.

There's no denying that animal experimentation is a very emotive issue. We can argue that it's cruel, that it's unethical and that we should respect animals and afford them rights. But at Humane Research Australia (HRA), we have found that when we discuss this subject with researchers, or with parents of children born with genetic defects or terminal cancer, every ethical argument is cast aside. Animal experiments are then considered a 'necessary evil'.

For this reason, HRA has always based its opposition to animal experiments on scientific grounds. We maintain that medical progress is best made when research is species-specific and not led astray by data extrapolated from a different species.

Despite this sound position, however, when someone is personally affected by serious illness it can be easy to cast such logic aside and hang on to any hope of survival – even (in some cases) at the expense of animals.

Following my diagnosis and subsequent surgery, I was scheduled to undergo chemotherapy. Knowing that enormous funding is pumped into cancer research each year, I conducted my own investigations and discovered that each of the drugs that I was to be given were discovered more than forty years ago – almost before I was born.

This didn't make sense. Haven't we all seen countless news headlines over the past few decades heralding cures of cancer

(all based on animal trials)? Where was that miracle cure now that I needed it? And what have all the millions of animal lives lost and billions of dollars pumped into cancer research in the interim achieved? Here I am, being treated with the generation – old cut/poison/burn technique that's been used for years – which is certainly not a cure!

Don't get me wrong, no one could ever fault the aims of the millions of people and organisations across the world who willingly donate their money and time to cancer research. But why can't that research be better directed and money more efficiently spent so that we can obtain a cure without wasting more time and more lives (animal and human)?

The USA's Federal Drug Administration (which guides Australian research) advises that 9 out of 10 drugs 'successfully' tested on animals don't work when translated to humans'. Some even cause significant harm to humans. At HRA, we argue this is because animals are genetically, metabolically and anatomically different. Logically, what else can we expect?

Frustratingly, I also ask myself now about all the thousands of drugs that were tested on animals but thrown out when they were found to be 'unsuccessful' – surely if there was some hope of those drugs working in the first place to the extent they were good enough to be tested on animals, they were worth pursuing via other means? Could we have inadvertently discarded a potential cure for cancer?

Post surgery, and after many days and nights considering my choices, I eventually elected to proceed with the conventional course of treatment. Ultimately, what really convinced me is that I strongly believe that those 1960's drugs were developed not because of animal experiments but despite them. Of course, it would be foolish to deny that I also want to live, but I believe that my desire to live must be based on the choices and actions in my career and lifestyle that I am making during and after treatment.

Throughout my ordeal, my respect for each of the health professionals I have dealt with – the nurses, surgeons, oncologists – provided me with the greatest of care, but they, too, are limited to the treatments that are available to them. What is so disappointing is that researchers continue to base their work on animal models and people continue to pin their hopes on a miracle cure that unfortunately continues to be based on the wrong species. After all these decades why aren't we smarter?

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Cancer research using animals – progress to date

Ray and Jean Greek (Authors of Specious Science, Sacred Cows and Golden Geese and What Will We Do If We Don't Experiment On Animals?) factually point out that,

- between 1970 and 1985, researchers subjected an estimated 300 to 400 million animals to more than half a million compounds to check for anticancer effects;
- based on these animal experiments, only 80 compounds progressed to clinical trials;
- just 24 proved to have any anticancer activity in humans, and, of these, 12 went on to have a role in chemotherapy; but
- all 12 of these compounds were chemical variations of previously known chemotherapeutic agents. The fact that these chemicals could be used to fight cancer had already been predicted by their chemical structure.

In other words, for those 15 years (and for all the years since), billions of dollars of investment money was ploughed into subjecting millions of animals to the most painful, cruel and barbaric procedures and then killing them, all of which proved nothing new.

For further information go to: whale.to/a/fox.html

So, now that I am personally affected by cancer I can confirm that my position on animal experimentation has indeed changed – I am more opposed to animal research than I ever thought possible. Animal experiments are extremely cruel and scientifically flawed. If we are ever to find genuine cures for cancer and other ailments, we must focus on species-specific research – not antiquated methods that can be erroneously extrapolated from a species that differs from us anatomically, genetically and metabolically.

But does that mean that we just use humans as the new 'guinea pigs'? Ultimately we are anyway, given that results of animal testing are inconclusive. But replacing animal tests with a battery of human-specific tests – like microdosing and microfluidic chips – will give us a more accurate prediction of how new drugs and treatments will react in humans.

As for me, I'll continue with the conventional 40-year-old treatment, together with my daily juices, a healthy lifestyle and vegan diet (now for more than 15 years) Did I mention some of those health professionals have been amazed at how well I am coping with my treatment?

And no, I'm certainly not pinning my hopes on a miracle cure discovered from animal experiments because I know that will never happen.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- QUESTION charities' requests for your donation and tell them that for scientific and humane reasons you do not support animal experiments
- REFER to humanecharities.org.au – our Humane Charities List for donations and bequests that will NOT fund animal experiments.
- BECOME a member of HRA
- BECOME a monthly donor
- CONSIDER a bequest to HRA
- SUBSCRIBE to our email list

Contact our office for any further information.



MY DETAILS:

Name:
 Postal address:
 Post code:
 Phone: (m) (w/h)
 Email:

PAYMENT DETAILS:

I am paying by:
 Cheque/Money Order Mastercard VisaCard
 Number:
 Expiry date /
 Name on card:
 Signature:

I'D LIKE TO MAKE A REGULAR MONTHLY DONATION OF:

\$100 \$50 \$25 \$ Other per month, until further notice. I understand that this payment can be stopped by me at any time.

HERE IS MY ONCE OFF DONATION OF:

\$100 \$50 \$25 \$ Other

PLEASE SIGN ME UP TO BECOME A MEMBER:

\$25

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