

RABBITS- THE VICTIMS OF SCIENCE

Overview

Each year in Australia thousands of rabbits are used in numerous areas of research, from medical testing to environmental studies. In NSW in just one year, 2376 rabbits were subjected to experimentation, 708 of whom were used for regulatory product testing. Government statistics indicate that of these 2376 rabbits, only 12 remained to live free after the experiments. The fate of laboratory animals is rarely good.

In Victoria, 1582 rabbits were used in a one-year period. Rabbits in these experiments are used as 'models' for kidney disease, cardiovascular research and hypertension. Many were also used for production of polyclonal antibodies - a cruel procedure which involves the repeated immunisation with an antigen to activate an immune response. After a few weeks the polyclonal antibodies are collected by blood extraction from the hapless rabbit. The antibodies are then used in a biomedical research and diagnostic testing. Rabbits are often the chosen species for antibody production because of their small size, long life span, their strong immune system and their blood being easy to obtain.

Historically, rabbits were used in the particularly cruel acute eye toxicity test known as the Draize test which was devised by toxicologists as a

method for assessing the irritation potential of substances such as household chemicals which might come in contact with human eyes. The test involves forced application of a substance to the eye of a non-anesthetised restrained rabbit and then subsequent observation of signs of irritation including swelling, haemorrhage, ulceration, and discharge. It is an extremely painful experiment. Because of its controversial nature, the use of the Draize test around the world has declined in recent years. Years of campaigning by animal advocates and continued developments in new methods such as in vitro models continue to make the Draize an unnecessary test.

However, although the use of this cruel test may be waning, other invasive 'research' is still conducted on rabbits.

Harvesting antibodies from a rabbit

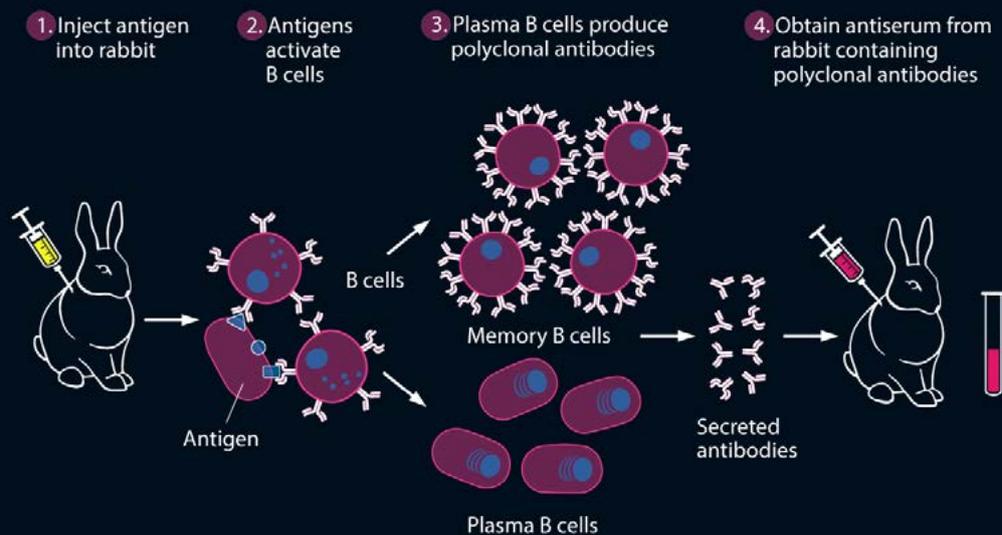


Photo credit: Lumen Learning

Environment management

Wild rabbits in Australia are now classified as a pest species and both the wild European rabbits and the domestic New Zealand white rabbits have for decades been subjected to invasive testing to induce disease and to undertake lethal dose testing of poisons, both in the laboratory and in the wild. They have been used in studies to develop guidelines and practices for culling programs and to test the effectiveness of bait stations¹. In the wild they are commonly killed with the poisons known as 1080 and pindone, both of which cause great suffering. Environmental and poisoning studies over the past decades have included this 2002 publication.²

In a 2018 publication,³ researchers at the CSIRO used young New Zealand White rabbit kittens to investigate why kittens have an underlying resistance to the G1.1 strain of calicivirus by deliberately infecting them with caliciviruses by way of injection, causing them to suffer the disease until they were killed. The calicivirus (rabbit haemorrhagic disease) has been widely used in Australia since 1996 as a biological control agent for killing the wild European rabbit populations. After infection most adult rabbits will die painfully from organ failure some 12 to 36 hours thereafter.

3 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30235853/>

1 https://www.wheatbelt.nrm.org.au/sites/default/files/knowledge_hub/documents/99_01_bait_stat_final_done.pdf

2 <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1046/j.1365-2664.2002.00738.x>



Medical experiments

According to the Baker Heart and Kidney Institute’s website,⁴ rabbits are used in the neuropharmacology laboratory as models for chronic kidney disease and hypertension, amongst other disease models. Chronic kidney disease in rabbits is induced by way of surgery to electro-lesion the cortex of a kidney and hypertension is caused by feeding rabbits and their offspring high fat diets.

A 2020 publication⁵ by researchers at the Royal North Shore Hospital in New South Wales describes how rabbits underwent coronary artery ligation in an attempt to replicate the human condition of severe congestive heart failure and administered drug therapy using clinically available treatments already in human use for other conditions such as urinary incontinence. Deliberately-caused heart failure in a rabbit does not replicate a naturally occurring heart condition in a human, and attempting to rely on the results and extrapolate them to humans is highly misleading.

Rabbits are simply not laboratory tools for ‘researchers’ to use. The use of these sentient animals, and indeed, the use of all animals, is no longer justifiable as it is widely regarded as unreliable to attempt to extrapolate results from animal experiments to the human condition. With more than 90% of drugs failing when they reach the clinical setting, after animal experimentation, better methods of non-animal research must now urgently be developed.⁶

4 <https://www.baker.edu.au/research/laboratories/neuropharmacology>

5 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32842758/>

6 G.A. Van Norman (2019) Phase II trials in drug development and adaptive trial design J Am Coll Cardiol Basic Trans Science, 4 pp. 428-437

Limitations of the law

Whereas the objective of the Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes is to promote humane and responsible care and use of animals,⁷ it permits what is termed as ‘necessary suffering’ inflicted on the research animal. For example, depending on the experiment, a rabbit in a research facility might be entitled to a nesting box with straw, however he/she is by law allowed to be starved from water and food for experimentation,⁸ and be housed in a cage not bigger than its size for experiments such as muscle cramping.⁹

7 National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Code of Practice of the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes 8th Edition 2013 (National Health and Medical Research Council, 8th ed, 2013)

8 Lascelles, Reem. (2019). The Oxymoron of Caged Animal Welfare: A Case Study in The Australian Caged Rabbit Meat Industry. *Derecho Animal. Forum of Animal Law Studies*, 144.

9 O’Sullivan, S., *Animals, Equality and Democracy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 138



Rehoming

The NSW Department of Primary Industries provides guidelines¹⁰ (December 2020) on the rehoming of animals after their use in research however at this date there are no statistics available on whether any rabbits have been rehomed after their use in the laboratory.

“Currently, it is left to the discretion of research institutes whether they rehome animals after their use in research. Certainly, rabbits can adapt and thrive in a home environment. Rabbits are rehomed via specialist rehoming groups focussed on giving a new life to survivors of animal experimentation”

Rachel Smith, CEO Humane Research Australia.

If you are interested in rehoming a rabbit in NSW or the ACT, please contact the Liberty Foundation at <https://www.libertyfoundation.org.au>

10 https://www.animaethics.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1275251/Research-Animal-Rehoming-Guidelines.pdf



WHAT
YOU
CAN
DO

Please join our campaign by asking our government to fund “human-relevant” research, not cruel and misleading animal experiments by signing HRA’s Petition¹¹

11 <https://www.change.org/p/greg-hunt-mp-i-am-not-a-lab-tool-fund-non-animal-methods-of-research-not-cruel-animal-experiments>