

Editorial

Extremists hinder cures for age related diseases

While one must expect an open and democratic society to spawn groups who wish to protest about a particular issue, it is unfortunate that the methods used by some are extreme and even violent. One such group emerged in Britain some years ago following a brief (and inexcusable) incident secretly filmed in the animal house of Britain's largest testing facility, Huntingdon Life Sciences. The expose stimulated a so-called animal rights group to perpetrate a series of disgraceful and cowardly attacks, both personal and to property, on the employees of that world-class institution until due legal processes curbed the violence.

The banner-waving and mindless chanting does however apparently continue on occasion at Huntingdon and elsewhere. These tactics and threats of violence have now led to the cancellation of a plan to build a new primate-research facility in Cambridge as part of that prestigious university, whose management cited not only the delay to the planning process caused by the protesters but also the subsequent long-term cost of providing security. The facility would have been used by our British colleagues to carry out crucial work on brain disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, which are increasingly affecting our ageing populations. Such work will no doubt proceed elsewhere but there is the obvious danger that Britain (accounting for a substantial part of European biomedical research) and its scientific community will lose out as that particular, and potentially hugely beneficial, research activity moves to other countries, such as the USA, less threatened, or intimidated, by animal terrorists.

It is particularly ironic that problems of this nature should beset Britain, a country with some of the strictest rules in the world governing the use of animals combined with perhaps the most efficient government enforcement of these rules in the world. And it is particularly sad for those with, or destined to suffer from, age-associated mental disorders, desperate for some relief from these debilitating and ultimately fatal afflictions. One only has to have had the experience as a friend or carer to know that the long decline in well-being associated with Alzheimer's represents a protracted and terrible way for a life to end – unknowable misery for the victim, traumatic to the extreme for the friends and relatives.

Charles Darwin said that "physiology cannot possibly progress except by means of experiments on living animals, and I feel with the deepest conviction that he who retards the progress of physiology commits a crime against mankind". Since Darwin's era things have changed in biomedical research but if medical progress is to continue with its present speed, scientists need access to laboratory animals when testing hypotheses at the biological organisational level of the intact individual. It is disappointing that the extremists, who obstruct research into disease mechanisms, seem uninterested in having a sensible and mature dialogue with the research community. Following the introduction of Russell and Burch's concept of the Three Rs in 1959 there has been a continuous and significant implementation of the Replacement, Reduction and Refinement framework in biomedical research by the scientific community (Carlsson et al., 2004). However, learning the intricate workings of that most complex organ, the brain, requires the use of animals including non-human primates – alternatives are not available at this point in time, whatever the extremists may claim.

JH

Reference

Carlsson HE, J Hagelin & J Hau: Implementation of the Three Rs in biomedical research. Veterinary Record. In Press 2004.