

UK laboratory animals

Experimentation reduced

THERE are signs that the pressure of public opinion has caused researchers to think more carefully about experiments on living animals. The number of such experiments in Britain decreased by 4 per cent last year. And although the number of licensed experiments has remained constant, the 3.5 million new experiments reported in 1984 is the smallest since 1959, according to statistics published by the Home Office in its annual report last week (Cmnd 9570, HMSO, £4.70). Just over half of the licences to perform experiments on living animals are held by people in universities and about a quarter by those working for commercial companies; but 53 per cent of the experiments are performed now in the commercial sector and only 22 per cent in universities.

The largest decrease between 1983 and 1984, occurred in experiments on amphibians and reptiles (a 44 per cent fall) and

mice (8 per cent down). Experiments on birds and fish increased but, even here, the total is still less than that in 1980. Even cosmetics testing has been reduced, although only by 3 per cent of the amount in 1983. Of the experiments performed on live animals in Britain, almost all (80 per cent) are either to investigate safety and hazards or to look at body structure and function.

The emphasis on pain placed in the recent white paper (policy document) (Cmnd 9521) on *Scientific procedures on living animals* (see *Nature* 23 May, p. 267)



is continued in the Home Office annual report. The Cruelty to Animals Act requires that animals must be anaesthetized during an entire experiment and, if the animal is likely to be affected post-operatively, killed before recovery. If this frustrates the object of the experiment, the researcher must obtain a special licence from the Home Secretary signed by the president of a learned society and a professor of medical science, as well as reporting each year on details of the experiments performed. The act only allows experiments at all for the purposes of increasing physiological knowledge or for prolonging life and alleviating suffering.

The white paper, which seeks to restrict animal experiments further, is unlikely to be debated in parliament in the next 12 months. This delay has disappointed organizations such as the British Veterinary Association, the Committee for the Reform of Animal Experimentation and the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments. They feel that the white paper proposals are a necessary first step in the protection of laboratory animals and ensuring that their suffering is minimized. But the government is reluctant to set a timetable for debating such a controversial issue.

Maxine Clarke

• The 21 member states of the Council of Europe have adopted a convention that will lead to better protection of vertebrate animals used for scientific purposes. Bri-

tain will sign the convention "in the early autumn", Home Secretary Mr Leon Brittan says. Britain has played a leading role in drafting the convention and the government intends to use an article "enabling member states to adopt more restrictive measures than those laid down". The convention aims "to balance the needs of research with the consideration owing to live animals; to protect them from pain and suffering; and to ensure that non-sentient alternatives are used wherever practicable". Member states will be required to publish annually statistics on the use of animals. □

Framatome

French company still adrift

FRAMATOME, the French constructor of pressure vessels for the French nuclear reactor network, is still looking for a buyer a year after the collapse of its parent company, the steelmakers Creusot-Loire.

The reason for the delay is simply that Framatome at present does not appear a good buy. Despite the French nuclear success story, most of the reactors that France needs are already built or under construction. The government has now reduced orders to one 1,300-MW reactor every couple of years, and there is unlikely to be an upturn in orders before the oldest reactors, built in the mid-1970s, need replacement in the late 1990s. Exports of French pressurized water reactors (PWRs) have also proved almost impossible. And while Framatome will supply the pressure vessel for the first British PWR at Sizewell, if planning consent follows the public inquiry report due at the end of this year, the French fear that the British market may later be closed. British constructors are expected to get together with Westinghouse to design their own version for the world market, with the result that even if there is an expansion of PWR construction in Britain after Sizewell, Framatome may not benefit. And even if Framatome does get a place, the prospect seems far enough off that the company's immediate problems will not thereby be solved.

Thus the French atomic energy commission, which is now looking after Framatome, would like the company to diversify. Uses for nuclear pressure vessels are, however, relatively few, and Framatome staff are already beginning to fear Framatome's dismantlement. That, however, might prove to be such a political embarrassment for the present government, with nuclear power being rightly seen in France as a national success story, that it can be discounted for the time being. If, however, the right is returned to power at the next elections, it would be a simple stroke to dismantle Framatome — and blame it on the economic failures of the previous government.

Robert Walgate

US animal rights

Washington

A FOUR-day sit-in by animal rights protesters at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) ended late last week with the surprise announcement by Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler that she was meeting the demonstrators' demand for an end to NIH support of the University of Pennsylvania's Head Injury Laboratory.

The laboratory was the target last year of a break-in by the Animal Liberation Front, during which equipment was vandalized and videotapes of experiments were stolen. Researchers at the laboratory induce brain injuries in monkeys to study how damage and recovery occurs in head-injury accidents.

According to an NIH spokesman, NIH officials were already investigating complaints about violations of its animal care regulations at the laboratory when the sit-in began; the investigators' report was expedited by one day because of the protest, however.

The NIH investigators, who reviewed videotapes and inspected the laboratory, concluded that the researchers had not properly trained or supervised technicians, had performed surgery on animals in unsterile environments and had failed to use proper anaesthesia and analgesia for the animals to minimize pain. NIH left open the possibility that financial support could be reinstated. NIH director James Wyngaarden said he would make a final decision after the University of Pennsylvania has been given a chance to respond. NIH did not criticize *per se* the use of monkeys in the experiments or the experimental protocols.

Stephen Budiansky