

On their own

□ The University of Oxford is failing to give official support to academics speaking out in favour of animal research, says Jim Giles.

Jim Giles

Mingling with the crowd at last weekend's march in support of animal research at Oxford was Chris Patten, the university's chancellor. But you had to be quick to spot him.

Patten did not take to the podium to speak. Nor did he stay long. He wasn't mentioned in mainstream media reports (including our own, see '[Demo backs animal lab in Oxford](#)'), in part because the university chose not to put out a press release about the event.

"He happened to be around and wanted to show support," says a spokeswoman at the University of Oxford press office. His presence at the march did not, she adds, mean that the university endorsed the demonstration.

Now hold on a minute. Animal activists want to deter the Oxford from building a new animal house: they have burnt down university property and they routinely shout abuse at scientists to try to achieve this. Last weekend, students and scientists took to the street to defend the need for the new facility. Why didn't their rally get more support from the university than a visit from a chancellor who "happened to be around"?

Sworn to secrecy?

This desire to keep a low profile is not new. Around two years ago, I called the university's press office to ask about plans for the new facility. The activists had just forced the University of Cambridge to abandon plans for an animal facility, so I expected Oxford to be cagey. But the woman I spoke to denied that plans for the facility existed. This was despite the fact that builders were already at work on the site and that the plans had been mentioned in the university's official newsletter.

I then called back and asked whether the university's primate research would transfer to the new building, the press officer said that Oxford didn't do such research. I pointed out that I'd seen primates in labs in Oxford. She eventually called back to acknowledge both the plans for the new facility and the primate work.

Granted, that could have been a one-off incident. And things have changed since then. Oxford's press office now does an excellent job of promoting the merits of the animal house, construction of which continues despite protests. It answers hundreds of calls on the topic every week. Patten has defended the university's right to do animal research when questioned by journalists. And when others want to brave the threats and talk to the media, the press office gives them the necessary training. Security advisors are also on hand to discuss the potential threats.

Yet the suspicion persists that Oxford's administrators, who set public-relations policy, still think the university can beat the activists by maintaining a low profile.

Going it alone

Just before the march, for example, Oxford officials e-mailed the scientists and students involved to remind them of the dangers involved and to point out they could still pull out. It is right for the university to advise its staff of risks. But several researchers have told me, and the university press office, that they felt this e-mail was an attempt to undermine the march. Having seen the email, I have to say I agree. They say there have been other communications in which senior administrators have questioned whether they should be actively promoting animal research.

The press office says they did not mean to discourage or encourage attendance, simply to provide information. But couldn't the university be doing more than giving its researchers security advice? Why didn't Patten, or another senior administrator, speak at the march? Why didn't the university issue a statement in support of those who made a personal decision to attend?

The official, and bizarre, reason for not supporting the demonstration, says the press office, is that there is no "mechanism" for deciding whether the university should do so.

Whatever the reason for the university's reluctance to get involved, the rally was a success. It won't have changed the minds of committed activists, but it knocks their claim that animal research lacks support. It also boosted the confidence of Oxford researchers who were previously too fearful to discuss their work, confidence that wouldn't be so low had Oxford been bolder before now.

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Was the university at the rally for its researchers?

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