UK animal welfare

Government plans upset RSPCA

THE Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has launched a broadside attack on the British Government's proposals for legislation on the use of animals in scientific procedures. According to RSPCA, the proposals, published in a white paper in May, are "sadly deficient in crucial areas" and "fail totally" to meet what it sees as the central issue, the control of pain and suffering.

To illustrate its misgivings, the society's Animal Experimentation Advisory Committee has compiled a 350-page dossier, *Pain and Suffering in Experimental Animals in the UK*, in which are reproduced 35 scientific papers, all published within the past eight years, which describe procedures that suggest suffering was caused to animals. According to Ms Sheila Silcock, research consultant to the committee, several of the procedures are remote from possible benefit to man or animal and some suffer from serious deficiencies in experimental design or in the model systems used.

Each is accompanied in the dossier by a detailed critique. The society had felt that the debate on animal experimentation was becoming too abstract, and wants the government to say whether the procedures described would be permitted or modified under the proposed new legislation. The society does not want any details of the papers to be given which could lead to their being identified, but they include experiments on trauma, therapeutic drugs and poisons. The document has now been submitted to the Home Secretary.

The government's proposals (see *Nature* 303, 391; 1983) include the continuation of the provision that experiments are not permitted which cause "severe and enduring" pain. While recognizing the inherent problems of definition, RSPCA says that in no circumstances should animals be subjected to pain that is severe or which is more than momentary in duration. Moreover, the society argues, there may be many forms of suffering other than pain, such as fear, hunger and illness, which should be controlled.

RSPCA's other main objections to the existing proposals concern justification and public accountability. It believes the Home Secretary should accept ultimate responsibility for the justification of licensed experiments and that he should be answerable on such questions in Parliament. However, unlike some other animal welfare groups, RSPCA wants the same strict pain controls to apply to all procedures, regardless of their purpose. The society thinks that the role and composition of the proposed new Animal Procedures Committee have not been sufficiently clearly defined, and wants greater encouragement to be given to the search for procedures that avoid the use of

animals.

The society does however welcome the restrictions on the use of animals for educational purposes and the increased scope of the licensing system. But there is a danger, the society says, of the system becoming an unworkable bureaucracy. Applications for licences should be accompanied by two separate sponsors, the second to be chosen by the Home Office from a list of acknowledged experts, and the proposed act should refer to a code of practice specifying standards of animal care and husbandry.

The Home Office is now considering various comments it has received on the white paper, and will shortly be inviting welfare groups — including RSPCA — to a meeting to discuss their views. Subject to availability of parliamentary time, a bill could be debated in about a year's time.

Tim Beardsley

Jammu, India

THESE fossil tusks are still lying where they were found a few years ago by geologists — near the village of Lovely some 40 km east of Jammu in the Swalik hills of India. The largest tusk, thought to be the biggest ever found, is approximately 4 m long and up to 25 cm in diameter.

The tusks have been identified as belonging to an extinct species, *Elephas ganesa*, the immediate ancestor of present Indian elephants. Although protected from the elements by a shed, the tusks have had no preservation work performed on them so are gradually deteriorating.

The previous "record tusk", some 3.25 m long, was also found in the Jammu area ten years ago and is now in the museum in Jammu City.

Suraj Saraf

High-technology magnets

UK company goes public

THE Oxford Instruments Group successfully went public last week. The company has attracted much interest in recent years among watchers of high technology companies. Starting from the proverbial garden shed in 1959, it now has a virtual monopoly in the United Kingdom in high performance superconducting magnets for nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) whole-body scanners and last year, had a turnover of £26 million and made a profit of £2.7 million before tax. The company cashed in on this interest last week, when the first public share offer was oversubscribed by 6.8 times at a striking price of 285 pence per share, giving the group a paper value of more than £126 million. Shares had been offered for sale by tender, with a minimum tender price of 230 pence per share. As a result of the sale, 18 per cent of the capital will be publicly owned.

The immediate spur for last week's offer was the need for a new factory to build large magnets for body scanners. The market for such systems is expected to expand rapidly over the next few years, as NMR avoids exposure to damaging X rays used in existing scanning systems. Recent research by Professor Peter Mansfield at the University of Nottingham has also shown the potential of NMR scanners to produce moving pictures, useful for diagnosis of, for example, heart conditions.

Mr Martin Wood, the company's deputy chairman, founded Oxford to exploit research being carried out at the University of Oxford's Clarendon Laboratory, and links with university departments and other research institutions have grown. Many observers see the Oxford Group's organization as a model for successful technology transfer, divided as it is into seven semi-autonomous operations, each catering for a different product area. Products now include NMR spectroscopy and cryogenic systems for research use, ambulatory patient monitoring apparatus and diagnostic aids, as well as industrial analysis and control equipment. More recently, the group has started to manufacture plasma and ion beam milling equipment for semiconductor manufacture.

Wood has now handed over day-to-day running of the company to his collaborator of many years, Barrie Marson. Wood now plans to devote more of his time to making similar successes out of other ideas that are still hidden in laboratories. Few can be better qualified to undertake such an exercise. Oxford has had its share of problems during its 25-year history, most of them traceable to reluctance on the part of financial institutions to put large sums into an obscure-sounding idea. But with a good track record, Wood may find the going easier.

Tim Beardsley