

Animal welfare

UK compromise and coercion

THE British Toxicology Society has thrown its professional weight behind the campaign by British animal welfare groups to end the LD₅₀ test of acute toxicity. A special report by a working group of the society concludes that accurately determined LD₅₀ values are rarely justified, and proposes an alternative test which it considers more humane while still providing essential safety data for product labelling and classification.

The LD₅₀ test has long been a main target of animal welfare campaigners. New guidelines published in 1981 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) lowered the number of animals needed for the test, which establishes the quantity of a substance needed to kill 50 per cent of a group of test animals. Even with the new guidelines, however, 30 animals would typically be used for each LD₅₀ determination.

The alternative proposed by the British Toxicology Society classifies substances into broad bands of toxicity based on their observed effects on animals at pre-set dosages. If survival at one level is more than 90 per cent, with no evident sign of toxicity, dosage is increased by a factor of 10; if it is less than 90 per cent, dosage is decreased by the same factor. This procedure continues until the pre-set level is found that causes evident toxicity but allows more than 90 per cent survival, which specifies the classification. With 10 animals per group and 3 classes of toxicity (as in the current EEC chemical regulations), on average between 10 and 20 animals would be used.

The Home Office in London is working on new proposals for animal welfare legislation, and is keenly aware of public pressure to reduce the number of animals used in routine testing. Mr David Mellor, Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, is known to be sympathetic to the view that the continued widespread use of LD₅₀ should not be necessary. The Toxicology Society hopes its acute toxicity test procedure will gain peer acceptance and become internationally recognized.

The claimed advantages, apart from compatibility with existing European systems, include the fact that (unlike LD₅₀) signs of toxicity are included in the assessment, while severely affected animals can be humanely killed without affecting the outcome of the study. The new test is also likely to be less variable between laboratories than LD₅₀. The long-term aim of the society is to force a European or a UK initiative in OECD aimed at establishing new guidelines. An existing EEC directive on dangerous substances that seems to imply use of the LD₅₀ test would probably need amending.

Meanwhile, the Home Office is still undecided on how to modify the controversial

"pain clause" in the draft proposals on animal experiments that it published last year. It is being pressed by the British Veterinary Association and others to extend the existing ban on experiments that cause severe and enduring pain to those causing severe pain or distress. The association, together with the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments (FRAME), is also pressing for a linkage between the amount of pain or distress that may be allowed in an experiment and the potential benefits. Home Office officials are now thought ready to accept the principle of such a linkage.

Civil disobedience and violent protest against animal experiments are likely to be

stepped up over the coming months in Britain. A coalition of hardline antivivisection organizations linked under the banner of "Mobilisation for Laboratory Animals" is planning a week of protests that will culminate in a national march on 12 May. The demands include a ban on the LD₅₀ test and the Draize eye test, as well as cosmetics testing and all behavioural, psychological and military experiments. Last weekend, a security guard was injured when protesters broke into testing laboratories owned by Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd. Some parties to the "mobilisation" coalition condone, if not actually organize, protests that entail physical violence, and more violent incidents seem likely. Later in the year, according to a spokesman, a vigil will be held outside every animal laboratory in Britain.

Tim Beardsley

Israeli-Egyptian relations

Cooperation in the doldrums

Rehovot

A LEADING Israeli physicist recently gave an "unofficial lecture" at a major Egyptian university. For political reasons, there was no advance notice of the lecture, organized by an Egyptian colleague whom the Israeli had met at a US conference. Word got around, however, and by the time the Israeli began to speak, the lecture room was crowded with young Egyptian researchers, most of whom stayed behind afterwards to discuss physics and to express the hope that full above-board links between Israeli and Egyptian scientists would soon be possible.

Although Israel and Egypt have been at peace for five years, there is at present only one place where scientists and scholars from the two nations can meet officially, the Israeli Academic Centre in Cairo headed by Professor Shimon Shamir of Tel Aviv University. The centre, sponsored principally by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, functions like the cultural centres of other nations, serving Israeli academics in Egypt for scholarly research, presenting lectures by these academics and giving Egyptian scholars access to Israeli research papers and books.

Such activities would be quite straightforward were it not for the fact that many in Egypt now regard all contact with Israel, no matter how innocent, as suspect.

Since the centre opened in May 1982, most of the lectures given there have been devoted to subjects of clear mutual interest. For example, Professor Sasson Somekh, an Israeli expert on Arabic literature and language, dwelt upon the fact that Hebrew and Arabic originate from the same linguistic family — and then dealt with problems of modernization in the same spirit. Similarly, Israeli musicologist Amnon Shiloah examined the influence of Arab music on Jewish music while Hebrew

University Professor Hava Lazarus-Yafeh discussed the relationship between Halkha (Jewish religious law) and Sharia (Moslem religious law).

Sometimes, Israeli lecturers have reported on research carried out in Egypt itself. Dr George Kanazi, a senior lecturer in Arabic literature at Haifa University, told his Cairo audience about mediaeval Arabic manuscripts on the art of wine-drinking. Kanazi, himself a Christian Arab born in Nazareth, pointed out that even after the advent of Islam, which prohibits intoxicating beverages, laxity in the interpretation of Islamic law had made wine-drinking "a luxury that was sought and enjoyed".

Many of the Israeli researchers visiting the academic centre are interested in Islam and many of the Egyptians are similarly interested in Judaism.

Egyptian doctoral candidates have received information, for example, on "Elijah the prophet in Jewish and Moslem folklore" and "the author Aharon Megged as a representative of Israel's 1948 generation". Other PhD candidates have sought and obtained material for studies comparing Egyptian and Israeli approaches to education, social welfare and architecture.

The reactions of Israelis to these interactions, and to Egypt generally, are variable. Shamir says that "Israelis who come to Egypt looking for fanaticism, political rigidity and uncompromising hostility towards their country find these things; those who come looking for open-minded attitudes, warmth and a desire for peace find them also."

Shamir regrets that it is impossible to reach agreement just now for scientific cooperation between Israeli and Egyptian research centres but welcomes "the beginnings of a cultural interchange" at this centre.

Nechemia Meyers