

## Animal experiments

SIR—Even if the death penalty for assassins diminished the risk of innocents being murdered, we should accept the risk and choose not to kill humans deliberately.

Even if scientific animal experimentation reduces the risk of human illnesses, we should accept the risk and choose not to experiment on animals.

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SIR—Your leading article (*Nature* 339, 32; 1989), arising from the contention that *Nature* should not have published an account of an experiment that was considered to have caused an unacceptable level of suffering to laboratory animals, hinges on the responsibility of a free press. But there may be occasions within that broader precept for restraint by the press when it is judged that harm might accrue from publication, and self-restraint of the scientific press is surely called for in the interests of maintaining high scientific standards, including ethical ones. If other journals are more lax as to what they publish, that is their business (and their readers may want to have their say). Scientific probity does not turn on the question of whether one's principles are observed by others.

Professor Colin Blakemore is clearly not in favour of free speech (*Nature* 339, 414; 1989). He would silence Clive Hollands by resort to *force majeure*, asking the Home Secretary to comment on the right of a member of the Animal Procedures Committee "to pontificate in this way". The proposal is sufficiently far-fetched not to warrant comment. Its purpose is to silence those with differing views, and for this it is necessary, of course, first to discredit them. Blakemore goes on to conceive that Hollands, who has been vilified by many anti-vivisectionists for his support for the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, would defend the animal activists' attack on the French research establishment in question.

One of the first casualties of terrorism is, it seems, clear discourse and any modicum of civility to those of differing views. One extreme brings out its opposite, and the first to get caught in the cross-fire are the moderates. For some ten years, there has been a hard-won dialogue in the middle ground on laboratory animal welfare in Britain and Hollands has been a leading figure in it. You, Sir, warn that "there is even a danger that the moderate groups that now share credit for the improved legislation . . . will be dis-

credited by the activists" (*Nature* 339, 491; 1989). I would add "and by those researchers who take extreme positions".

*Nature* trots out one of the old blandishments that "given anaesthesia there is hardly any pain" (surely a revelation to anyone who has undergone any considerably surgery). But *Nature* has surely done both science and laboratory animals a service in devoting space to this issue.

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SIR—The decision by Cambridge (Massachusetts) City Council to pass unanimously the first US city ordinance to protect laboratory animals, in a country lacking in such protection, is to be welcomed (*Nature* 340, 88; 1989).

Regrettably, however, there is no animal-welfarist representation on the proposed animal-care committees, so that the essential public confidence in the committees' ability to function impartially, with the best interest of animal welfare represented, has not been secured.

David Nathan, president of the research-orientated group Citizens United for Research and Education, is reported as saying that "the council was wise enough to see that individuals who are morally opposed to any animal research cannot possibly regulate its quality". Similar sentiments were expressed during the passage of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, 1986 through the House of Lords in an unsuccessful amendment on the make-up of the Animal Procedures Committee. Lord Melchett, in opposing the amendment, stated: "It is a little arrogant to assume that it will not be possible for people who hold strongly different moral perspectives on the use of animals for experiments and other abuses of animals to play a constructive part in the Committee in the future".

The welfarists who serve on the statutory Animal Procedures Committee, which includes this society's consultant, Clive Hollands, are playing a full and constructive role in the work of this committee. I believe this would also be the case with humane-society representatives serving on local animal-care committees. It is therefore of great concern that certain members of the international scientific community still hold such outdated, entrenched and arrogant positions.

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1. Hansard, House of Lords Reports Vol. 469 (23), Col. 765, 17 December 1985.

## Peer review

SIR—The many recent comments on anonymous peer review have not identified its basic weakness — reviewers have virtually no incentive to do an excellent job. Scientists receive promotion, tenure and status based on 'publish or perish' and 'get grants or get out' philosophies. There is no 'review right or regret it'. Journal editors receive either salary or status but anonymous reviewers receive no pay, no recognition and no blame for a poor review. No wonder there is what Robert Crichton called "complacent reviewing" (*Nature* 337, 110; 1989) which corrupts scientific literature with errors.

For peer review to ensure scientific integrity and accuracy, some reward system for referees is needed. Alternatively, peer reviewers could be replaced by 'expert reviewers', scientists who review full-time and are held to high standards.

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## Poetic justice

SIR—I can imagine no more satisfying example of poetic justice than the opportunity to refute a critic of a book review by citing the book itself as an unimpeachable authority. David A. Pyke (*Nature* 339, 248; 1989) chides me for misusing a word in my review of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I located the origin of the word 'scientist' in discussions among 'attendees' at the 1834 meeting of the British Association. Pyke says that I have confused active and passive, that the word I seek must be 'attenders', and that if 'attendee' exists at all it can only refer to "someone attended, for example a monarch or a bride, not someone attending".

Well Dr Pyke, 'attendee' does indeed exist, and I used it correctly. Consult Vol. 1 of the *OED* and you will find the definition: one who attends a meeting, conference etc. I confess that the word goes back only to 1961 and that it is, dare I utter the phrase, an Americanism. But then, we've been around for more than 200 years now and even the *OED* cites our neologisms.

By the way, and also using the *OED* as a source, the word 'attender' goes back to the fifteenth century, but has never been used to mean 'one who attends a meeting'. (Its principal meanings are 'one who gives heed' and 'one who attends or waits upon to give service'.) Thus in inventing 'attendee', we Yanks, ever the pragmatists, were meeting a linguistic need.

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