

In defence of animal research

The use of animals in laboratory research needs championing more than ever. Those defending it need to reflect discussions within the research community and engage positively with issues of public concern.

Animal research is essential for scientific and medical progress, and animal sacrifice is regrettably sometimes needed in the pursuit of human needs. But the conduct of such research needs continual reassessment as scientific knowledge grows and ethical and societal perspectives evolve. As animal-rights activists become more sophisticated in their attempts to hobble and ultimately end the use of laboratory animals, it is vital to preserve and strengthen public confidence.

At issue in the United States are two initiatives intended to toughen protection for research animals. One would, for the first time, define 'distress' under the 1966 Animal Welfare Act. It would also institute a new reporting system aimed at better quantifying the intensity and duration of pain and distress. (The current reporting system contains no scale for measuring these.) In July the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which enforces the act, asked for comments on how to go about making these changes. The deadline is 7 November.

The second initiative would add rats, mice and birds to the protection of the Animal Welfare Act. USDA has used this law's ambiguous wording to avoid monitoring rodents and birds, arguing that the government does not have the funds for this. Rats and mice comprise some 95% of lab animals, and this will doubtless increase as the boom in transgenic mice continues. Animal-rights activists last year brought a suit against the department for "arbitrarily" excluding the animals. Perhaps anticipating the weakness of its legal case, USDA last week agreed to settle the suit by initiating the administrative process that would probably result in extending the law.

Both moves to expand the law's reach have elicited protest from research advocates in Washington, led by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the National Association for Biomedical Research (NABR) and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB). These groups argue that such changes would put an onerous, expensive new burden on researchers and their institutions without improving animal protection one whit.

On the issue of rodents and birds, their arguments found an important ally in the US Senate last week. As the lawsuit was being set-

tled, AAMC asked leaders from the University of Mississippi Medical Center to lobby Thad Cochran, a Republican Mississippi senator, who chairs the Senate agriculture spending subcommittee. He responded by altering the bill financing USDA in 2001, forbidding it to settle the lawsuit with the activists. A joint House-Senate committee unanimously approved the amendment without debate. At the least, the research lobby has succeeded in winning a one-year reprieve.

The impression given by groups such as AAMC, NABR and FASEB is that researchers are united in opposing the changes. But the respected American Association for Laboratory Animal Science supports the coverage of rats and mice, calling their exclusion from the law's protection "ethically indefensible". Consider, too, a survey published last year in *Lab Animal* (Vol. 28, issue 6, pp. 38-40). It canvassed 491 members of animal care and use committees, who oversee the use of animals under the Animal Welfare Act, and nearly two-thirds of whom are themselves animal researchers. Fully 73% felt the act should cover rodents. As the study authors concluded, it would be a distortion to present the debate as a conflict between animal researchers and animal protectionists.

Some of the research lobby's arguments verge on the reactionary. As FASEB points out, a definition of distress being considered by USDA is vague and could lead to widely varying interpretations. But the answer is surely not to dispense with a definition, as FASEB urges. AAMC, meanwhile, points to the "millions of dollars and uncountable hours" that would have been wasted had USDA's "misguided" attempt to settle the rodent lawsuit succeeded. It argues that scientists already apply the best possible care to rodents because good science and Public Health Service regulations require it (see also page 671). But the act would have the force of law. It would add unannounced inspections. Big universities may have nothing to hide, but what about the many smaller institutions and private biotechnology companies that use only rodents and so haven't yet fallen within the reach of the law?

Costs and practical burdens are indeed issues to be confronted. But research lobbyists who have often stated that it is a privilege to use lab animals now risk giving the impression that some of them consider it a right. If that continues, research could suffer. ■

Blurred budget is bad news

Spain's government should stop shooting itself in the foot.

The Spanish government's announcement of an 11.3% increase in its research and development budget should have been good news. Coming on top of the launch of a Ministry of Science and Technology, statements of priority for R&D by José Maria Aznar, the prime minister, and a four-year plan to increase R&D spending from 0.9 to 2% of gross national product, 2000 looked like an *annus mirabilis* for Spanish science.

But scientists were suspicious. Complaints about the true distribution of R&D budgets have been common since 1998, when it became clear that a substantial amount of the annual spend was set aside for military research. But distrust has grown as the government has resisted publishing the military and civilian allocations.

Belatedly, next year's position is now all too clear (see page 664). The military research spend will increase disproportionately. And to add insult to injury, secrecy rules again. Only reluctantly was science minister Ramón Marimon forced to admit that more than 50% of the 2001 budget will be devoted to military R&D.

In seeking to hide the military figures, the government is doing neither its citizens nor itself any favours. Why exacerbate distrust in this way? The United States, France and the United Kingdom make a clear distinction between civilian and military spending, and that information is easily accessible to all. To restore disenchanted scientists' trust in the government, Spain's government needs to boost civil science, significantly and transparently. ■