

# Can reason defeat unreason?

This is Animal Rights Awareness Week in the United States – an occasion celebrated by the groups calling themselves animal activists of one stripe or another. Among biomedical scientists, the ‘celebration’ occasions acute despair.

DURING the past decade, US animal rights activists, initially dismissed by many researchers as on the fringe, have gained a strong political foothold, with an estimated 10 million individual members nationwide and a war chest of at least \$50 million. As Columbia University medical dean Herbert Pardes and colleagues wrote in a recent issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, “Conventional wisdom may see animal activists as the scrappy underdog grappling against the ‘biomedical behemoth backed by massive resources.’ Conventional wisdom is wrong.”

A small corps of researchers is trying to fight back, but recent efforts simply reveal what a long way they have to go. In an attempt to build a broad congressional base for their cause, a coalition representing more than 50 health organizations gave a party at the US Senate last week. Called “Saving Lives”, the reception drew a couple of hundred people from member organizations and one senator. He, Senator Howell Heflin (Democrat, Alabama) drew applause by announcing that he will reintroduce a bill to make it a federal crime to break into a research laboratory or make unauthorized use of research records, data or animals.

The animal rights groups can be expected to deluge Congress with letters of opposition from millions of ordinary citizens who have been convinced that research scientists are cruel. It is inconceivable that researchers could drum up letters of support that would even be worth counting. And therein lies part of the problem. The other lies in the scientists’ overall approach.

Timed to catch Congress’s attention in advance of lobbying by activists during Animal Rights Awareness Week, the biologists were scooped even in this effort by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which staged an animal-free circus at the House of Representatives the night before.

Where PETA had people painted as tigers handing out vegetarian tofutti bars, the coalition for Saving Lives had speeches. Surgeon General Antonia Novello, a paediatrician, talked about the animal studies that made the polio vaccine possible, and noted continuing research for a vaccine to save 1,000 infants a year aged 18 to 24 months from death from influenza type B. “All of this is due to animal research”, she said sincerely. The audience nodded politely. Nobel laureate Harold Varmus spoke compellingly about the role of animals in cancer research. Celebrity heart surgeon Michael DeBakey made the pitch for cardiology. Collectively

they made a strong case, but they were preaching to the converted.

The animal rights people go for the heart, the biologists for the head. Just recently, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a highly reasoned glossy ‘white paper’ (policy document) called *Science, Medicine, and Animals* that, inexplicably, has a photomicrograph of the structure of AZT on the cover rather than an animal whose sacrifice for research saved some child from imminent death. The white paper is an exemplary catalogue of the contributions of animal research to human medicine. It even makes a stab at touching the heart strings with brief vignettes. Gregg Mass, we are told, survived a case of non-Hodgkins lymphoma diagnosed just two weeks before his thirtieth birthday because of animals that died for him during years of research on chemotherapy.

But, in the end, the NAS/IOM monograph is meant for the head. “In writing this position paper”, say NAS president Frank Press and IOM president Samuel Thier, “our intention has been not to end the debate on whether and how animals are used in research; rather it has been to inform that debate.”

That is precisely the deficiency of the scientists’ position. They think they are engaged in an intellectual conversation. Not so. The past decade is evidence enough that the animal rights movement is not about reason. It is about eliminating the use of animals in research.

In 1985, the United States enacted the Health Research Extension Act which requires peer reviewers to ask whether the proposed use of animals in a protocol is necessary. That same year, the Animal Welfare Act of 1966 was amended to set standards for animal research and to establish for animals the equivalent of the institutional review boards that now exist at all research institutions and hospitals for the approval of human experimentation. Millions of dollars have been spent to improve facilities and correct deficiencies in research animal care. But it is not enough, largely because, for the extremists who, in the end, are in control, it is not the point.

Speaking at the Saving Lives reception, television actor David Birney got it right when he told the assembled researchers, “You have a powerful enemy abroad in the land that wishes you ill.” Scientists talk about facts. The animal people present their pitch through a photograph of a beautiful actress with a puppy in her arms. Sex and innocence.

Birney called it “deviously sentimental, manipulative, shabby, shameless.” By implication he acknowledged that it is effective.

It is often said in medicine, particularly with regard to addictive diseases, that the first step to a solution is an accurate diagnosis and recognition of the problem. For a couple of years now, research psychiatrist Frederick K. Goodwin, director of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, has been at the forefront of the “tell it like it is” school of combat in the animal rights war. He bluntly accuses PETA and other extreme groups of engaging in disinformation campaigns and misleading emotionalism, and charges them with obfuscating their true goal of eliminating animal research altogether under the guise of doing only animal research that is absolutely necessary.

Goodwin, nearly alone among federal officials until recently, directly challenges the animal rightists’ underlying belief that animals and human beings are morally equivalent. Then, several months ago, Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan entered the fray by calling certain animal groups “terrorists”.

Now, Bernadine Healy, barely two months into her new job as director of the National Institutes of Health, has joined the crusade. Speaking at Saving Lives, Healy, who as a cardiologist believes that in many circumstances rats are more valuable for research than dogs, subtly raised the rhetoric coming from government when she said “animal activists espouse a fallacy, namely that medical progress can be maintained without essential animal research.” Healy decried the activists’ terrorism (she said death threats against researchers are “inhuman”) and worried about the success of rights groups in getting their films and magazines into public libraries and schools. All worth worrying about.

Yet within the research world there is still no well-honed campaign to fight fire with fire. The activists show pictures of animals in surgery and the surgeons look cruel. No one shows pictures of children in surgery (which is often bloodier by far), who then emerge alive and well. One is left to imagine that the pretty child who has had a liver transplant never had her abdomen cut open in the process. The activists do well by filming the before but not the after.

Meanwhile, the research community at large has yet to learn that some arguments cannot be won by dry, safe, reasoned discourse.

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