

Demo backs animal lab in Oxford

OXFORD

Hundreds of scientists and students took to the streets of Oxford last weekend to march in favour of the city's new biomedical lab. The rally was the first time that proponents of animal testing have come out en masse to support their cause. It happened in response to threats from animal liberationists who claim that anyone associated with the University of Oxford is a legitimate target for physical violence.

The building of the Oxford lab has been hampered by persistent threats from animal-rights extremists. The project has been the target of regular protests by antivivisection campaigners, but previously only a handful of researchers had raised their voices to support the lab — most of its backers, including the university itself, had remained silent on the issue.

The event, held on 25 February and attended by around 600 marchers, represents a change of strategy amid swelling grassroots support for the lab and growing indignation over the intimidating tactics of animal-rights extremists. "The university was not keen on



Battle lines: Saturday's march was the first to support the building of an animal-research lab in Oxford.

raising the ante with a public protest," says Evan Harris, a local member of parliament. "But once there was this threat to Oxford students, I think the balance changed."

Harris describes the event as "the best kind of rabble-rousing", with protestors chanting slogans such as: "No more threats, no more

fear; animal testing's wanted here."

"This is an historic day — we're drawing a line in the sand," said Oxford neuroscientist John Stein as he addressed the rally. "We must not be intimidated. It's not just about research; it's about democracy."

Support for the event was fomented by

Sackings put editorial freedom on the spot

The abrupt sacking of two editors of a medical journal has been blamed on political differences between them and the journal's owners. With the editorial board fighting to have the two reinstated, the case has focused attention on the issue of editorial freedom for journals owned by academic societies.

John Hoey, former editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*, and his deputy Anne Marie Todkill were sacked on 20 February. Since then, 16 of 18 editorial board members have signed a letter asking the CMA to reinstate them. But Graham Morris,

president of CMA Media, the company that publishes the journal, denies his decision had anything to do with editorial freedom.

"Hoey did a good job in building the reputation of the journal," says Morris, adding that he is simply looking for "a fresh approach".

But Hoey and Morris have often locked horns. For example, Hoey ran an editorial in the 3 January 2006 issue detailing changes he says he was forced to make to an article about emergency contraception.

"I think it is extremely damaging for the reputation of the journal."

As part of a news story on whether pharmacists were asking users unnecessary questions before dispensing the 'Plan B' pill, the

CMAJ asked women across Canada to buy the pill from local pharmacies and report their experiences. According to Hoey, the Canadian Pharmacists' Association pressured

the CMA into insisting that the investigation could not be published without peer review. Morris says he wasn't influenced by the pharmacists, and that the

decision to remove the section about the investigation left a "well-balanced" piece.

There were also deep-seated differences between the journal editors and the CMA over privatization of health care, according to Trudo Lemmens, a medical ethicist at the University of Toronto. In August, the CMA voted to support a Supreme Court ruling that ended the ban on private health care in Quebec. The CMAJ however, is perceived to be against any erosion of the nation's public medical system. According to Hoey, a news story on incoming health

Laurie Pycroft, a 16-year-old blogger who was moved by what he saw as the one-sidedness of the animal-research debate. Until now, public demonstrations have been the preserve of groups opposed to animal research; scientists have mostly kept their heads below the parapet, for fear of personal reprisals. Pycroft created a research-advocacy website called Pro-Test, under whose banner the rally took place. "I'm extremely proud of the turnout," he told *Nature*. "I would have been happy with 50 people."

Meanwhile, about 150 antivivisection campaigners mounted an opposing demonstration. This event, culminating in a rally at the exact spot where pro-research campaigners had mustered just hours earlier, was part of a series of demonstrations by the animal-rights group Speak.

Demonstrators at the Speak rally noted the emergence, for the first time, of large-scale public opposition to their views. One demonstrator called for the issue to receive even wider coverage now that battle lines have been formally drawn. "We want to see a fair and unedited debate on prime-time television," he said.

It is a debate that traditionally has been played out in actions rather than words. The Oxford lab recently endured an 18-month hiatus in construction after the building company Walter Lilley pulled out in response to



Laurie Pycroft (right) founded Pro-Test and arranged the rally.

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bad publicity and diving share prices. Other research facilities, such as Huntingdon Life Sciences near Cambridge, have also been subjected to intimidating tactics and violence from extreme animal-rights groups.

Speaking at the Pro-Test event, Simon Festing, director of the London-based Research Defence Society, called animal research a "moral choice" and "a price worth paying". And Oxford neuroscientist Tipu Aziz said the march was aimed at "defending our right to better humanity's plight".

For others, the event was about standing up against what is perceived as bullying from extremists. "We're sick of the intimidation," says postgraduate research student Kristina Cook. "It's amazing how many people support what we do but are afraid."

Michael Hopkin

minister Tony Clemens, which included critical quotes about Clemens's acceptance of privatization was pulled by the management.

Jerome Kassirer, a member of the *CMAJ's* editorial board, points out that the journal has been doing well, making Morris's call for a change seem oddly timed: "Given that the journal was getting better, was more respected, and its impact factor was going up, it's hard to escape the conclusion that they were fired for political reasons."

Fiona Godlee, editor of the *British Medical Journal*, says she was "shocked and saddened" by the news. She

worries that the *CMAJ* may now recede into relative obscurity. "I think it is extremely damaging for the reputation of the journal."

Godlee hopes the firings will stiffen the resolve of journal editors to fight for a strong wall between their editorial content and the politics of home associations. "It is beholden on editors in general to hold the line for the sake of maintaining independent scientific voices around the world."

Also "very concerned" about the sackings is Shabbir Alibhai, a specialist in cancer and geriatrics at the University of Toronto and member of the

CMAJ's reader panel. But Alibhai says the episode raises questions about the role of journal editors, particularly when writing editorials. "Who is the editor representing when he or she pens words?" he asks. "The readers? The association? The journal? Or just the editors?"

Meanwhile editorial board member Philip Devereaux is widely distributing a petition to reinstate the editors. "This is one of the most fundamental battles, and it must be fought," he says. "It's not just because John and Anne Marie are really nice people."

Emma Marris

ON THE RECORD

"Who would have thought you'd have standing room only at a geek event?"

Immunologist John Cohen is astonished at how Café Scientifique — a series of informal debates with scientists — has taken off in Colorado.

Source: *New York Times*

SCORECARD

Dog turds
A California company announces plans to use a 'methane digester' to extract energy from faeces scooped up at a popular San Francisco park.

Thermal underwear
Employees at Japan's environment ministry bundle up to stay warm, after turning off the heat to help meet the country's targets for greenhouse-gas emissions.

Blackbeard
Engineers are building a sand dune underwater to protect what is believed to be the famed pirate's ship, sunk in 1718 off the coast of North Carolina.

DATAPOINT

How much do people in different countries care about science? A glimpse comes from the Science and Engineering Indicators 2006, published by the US National Science Board. People indicated their interest in new scientific discoveries on a scale from 1 to 100.

China	70
United States	69
Europe	54
South Korea	50
Japan	44

NUMBER CRUNCH

Earth crossed another population milestone last weekend.

6.5 billion is the world's population, as of 25 February.

131 million people will be born in 2006.

57 million people will die in 2006.

Source: *US Census Bureau*