

Against vicious activism

The US authorities need to strengthen their position on the use of animals in experiments.

Seven activists convicted of carrying out a campaign of intimidation against the animal-testing firm Huntingdon Life Sciences in Huntingdon, UK, were last month sentenced to between 4 and 11 years in prison. Hopefully, these sentences will stop future UK activists from using similar tactics, which included threats, hoax bombs, character assassination and property destruction.

Unfortunately, such tactics are increasingly being used by activists attacking scientists in California, where researchers who use animals are facing threats that include doorstep firebombs. The authorities trying to deal with this problem can find much in the UK authorities' approach to emulate.

First, activists who break the law must be vigorously pursued and prosecuted. At the same time, university leaders should set up protection plans for labs and researchers; coordinate with local and federal police before any attacks happen; and articulate a clear policy for students that legal protests are acceptable but acts of vandalism will be punished harshly.

Second, US federal, state and university authorities need to go beyond enforcement and take an unequivocal, public stand that emphasizes the importance of animal research for drug testing and basic science — as did former UK prime minister Tony Blair. It would be especially helpful if President Barack Obama were to make such a statement.

Such a level of open support might make individual researchers more apt to speak up about their own work. Britain again provides a good model in the form of Pro-Test, an activist group for those

supporting animal research. Its efforts in Oxford have given a public face to supporters of animal testing.

Finally, scientists should remember that adherence to the law cuts both ways. Researchers who use animals should embrace appropriate regulations on their activities and run their labs as if members of the public could walk in at any time to take a look. If they are seen to be committed to high-quality animal care, it can only improve their credibility among the public.

Indeed, the US regulatory framework on animal research needs streamlining and strengthening. The Department of Agriculture regulates the laboratory use of cats, dogs, primates, guinea pigs and rabbits under the Animal Welfare Act, but not the ubiquitous mice and rats. It can levy fines, but tends to do so very conservatively. The Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare oversees all non-human-vertebrate research funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), as well as by other agencies under the purview of the NIH's parent body, the US Public Health Service. But all it can do is stop grant monies from being awarded if the institutions involved do not win its approval. Many labs also get themselves accredited by the independent Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Care International. Its big punishment option is simply to withdraw accreditation.

The federal government should conduct a thorough review of the regulations concerning animal research to eliminate gaps, ensure compliance and strengthen penalties. Ideally, the oversight powers would be consolidated within a single organization. But, in any case, such measures might boost public confidence in animal research.

Over the long term, this multipronged approach should not only protect the safety of researchers, but should open up space for a constructive dialogue about issues in animal research — especially the pursuit of reduction, replacement and refinement of such experiments — that concern both public and researchers alike. ■

No time for rhetoric

Nicolas Sarkozy must engage with French researchers if his much-needed science reforms are to succeed.

In a speech on 22 January, as he set out his plans for a national strategy on science and innovation, French president Nicolas Sarkozy lambasted the country's university system as "infantilizing" and "paralysing for creativity and innovation". Sarkozy implied that French researchers were *fainéants* (layabouts) with cushy jobs, and no match for their supposedly more industrious British counterparts.

The speech was a typically melodramatic example of *la méthode Sarkozy* and, if it contained some home truths, it was largely a caricature. His harsh rhetoric in this case (see <http://tinyurl.com/av7flg>) can only reinforce the resistance he has set out to overcome. In 2000, the incumbent science minister, Claude Allègre, saw his plans for sweeping reforms dashed after scientists united against him, weary of his unnecessary provocations and sceptical of reforms imposed from on high with little consultation. Sarkozy is tempting a similar fate.

To their credit, Sarkozy and his science minister, Valérie Pécresse, have pushed through much-needed modernizations. These include

putting universities on the road to independence from the centralized administration, giving them badly needed cash, and injecting a healthy dose of grants awarded on the basis of competitive proposals (see *Nature* 453, 133; 2008).

But a massive strike across French universities that began this week (see page 640) suggests that, applied to the research community, *la méthode Sarkozy* has reached its limits. Sarkozy should heed Allègre's earlier mistakes and understand that he cannot modernize France's research system unless he has scientists on board. As things stand now, even top researchers who support the broad thrust of the reforms complain that their advice is being ignored, and that many changes seem as though they are being imposed by technocrats seeking grandiose institutional rearrangements as ends in themselves.

The substance of Sarkozy's reforms is right, but to succeed he must engage more with scientists. Many researchers experience the reforms as if they were in an aircraft flying through thick cloud, buffeted by the turbulence of almost weekly changes, with little idea of where the plane is taking them. Some fears are exaggerated, but others are legitimate. To arrive at their destination, Pécresse and Sarkozy need to consult on reforms with the navigators in the research community who know this airspace best. And Sarkozy, a speedy man, may have to accept that throttling back can sometimes avoid unwelcome accidents. ■