

Either open up, or give up

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I've always been fascinated by the simplicity that drives the complexity of the natural world. The diversity that defines and surrounds us is limitless. Yet everything we see, hear, smell, taste and touch manifested according to just five major laws of physics. Living systems are shaped by the same natural laws. There are billions of us, each unique, but the fundamental mechanisms that drive our development and behavior are similar. Nature is incredibly good at recycling good ideas for multiple purposes, and life is a tapestry of variety made from common fibers. We're alike and we're different. This is true across species and among members of the same species. Understanding the parallel patterns that shape and control diverse expressions of life has advanced biomedical progress for centuries. Evolution guarantees an infinite abundance of variations over time, and human lives are short. So, we spend the time that we have studying the rules in order to address the exceptions, most of which present as disorders.

We call this pursuit 'basic research', and it is the foundation for the development of virtually every cure and treatment that is available to people and animals today. But most people don't understand how basic research improves the quality of their lives. They think biomedical studies start and end with the evaluation of drugs in animals prior to their use in people. And they define the success and failure of animal-based research within this limited scope. They don't consider the limitless complexity of living systems on their trip to the pharmacy. They don't wonder how drugs are strategically designed or chosen to restore normal function. And they don't grasp the time, ingenuity and brilliance required to understand the functions of

life that informed the selection of the drugs they might use. People focus on what they experience directly: tangible biomedical discoveries that help, harm or fail them. They're unaware of the decades of basic research that led to these discoveries, and they're blissfully ignorant of the countless animal lives that were lost for this information. Consequently, billions of people worldwide have come to believe that animal studies are unnecessary, a vestige of our barbaric past. They believe we make animals sick for selfish reasons, and they hate us for doing this work.

Everyone deserves to know why we do this work and how we do it, and we have a moral and professional obligation to educate them.

We like to blame the animal rights movement for the public's ignorance, but the blame rests with us. We've kept the public in the dark for decades, acting as if the word "animals" was some kind of expletive that shouldn't be spoken aloud. We delivered an informational void and stepped aside for animal rights fanatics to fill it with fiction. Then we pretended people would find the truth for themselves while we kept it from them. Enough is enough! It's unreasonable for us to expect the world to support us blindly. Everyone deserves to know why we do this work and how we do it, and we have a moral and professional obligation to educate them. People won't stop hating us until we do.

Our colleagues across the pond have already figured this out, and I applaud them

for challenging the research community to commit to the "Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK." Several commercial and academic research organizations, charities, societies and advocacy groups have already signed on, and the list continues to grow. Signatories of the document are required to engage the public as follows: (i) be clear about when, how and why they use animals in research; (ii) enhance their communications with the media and the public about their research using animals; (iii) be proactive in providing opportunities for the public to find out about research using animals; and (iv) report on progress annually and share their experiences. The concordat is a bold and brilliant initiative that promises to set the stage for a new relationship between researchers and the public, one that is based on mutual respect, transparency and trust. Its ultimate goal is to encourage people to learn everything they can so they can make up their own minds about animal research, rather than parroting the nonsense they hear from fanatics committed to destroying us all.

Understanding Animal Research (UK) is coming to the 66th AALAS National Meeting in Phoenix, AZ, this year to educate us on this initiative and update us on its progress. Everyone at the meeting should attend their session. We haven't fully embraced transparency as a solution in the US. We still prefer to hide. By now, we should realize that hiding isn't a solution. It's a death sentence! We've backed ourselves into a corner, and we now have a critical decision to make. We can join our colleagues and commit to an international concordat on openness, or we can surrender in silence to the animal rights agenda and wait until there's nothing left to discuss.

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