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Beware of Hidden Threats

Anybody who reads the newspaper or watches television lately knows that “threats” are everywhere. Many of us in New York City—or any other big city for that matter—are on “high alert” whether the color of the day is yellow, orange, or red. Nonetheless, in many situations, heightened awareness of potential threats can have benefits—as is the case with the variety of serious potential dangers facing laboratory animal facilities and the creatures they house.

People working in the laboratory animal community are keenly aware of the potential for humans to disrupt animal research, as well as the need to implement security systems to abrogate this risk. Just about everyone is aware of the possibility of break-ins in which the intruders seek to release animals or destroy data, and most facilities have taken security measures, such as those discussed by author Banks on p. 37, to help prevent entry by those intending to disrupt the facility. However there are other, less obvious but equally ominous, threats to the welfare of the facility, the results of which might not be immediately apparent, but which can have serious impact on research and result in substantial losses in both money and research animals. Awareness of these subtler potential threats can be essential in helping to prevent future facility disasters.

Much attention has been given to the possibility of disease transmission from animal to human—as has been seen recently when animal caretakers contracted the potentially fatal herpes B virus from nonhuman primates—leading to such measures as the mandated use of personal protective equipment for those who come into contact with these animals. Unfortunately, considerably less has been said about the need for animal caretakers to dress to limit the transmission of disease from humans to animals; after all, facility workers can easily serve as a vehicle to bring microbes into the facility from the outside world or from one animal colony to another. It goes without saying that the inadvertent introduction of a pathogen could potentially have tragic consequences for any laboratory animal research program, but with proper planning and protective gear, such problems can certainly be averted. While it is important for those entering the facility to properly clothed, the requirement to wear too much protective equipment may unnecessarily tax the facility's limited budget, as gowns, bonnets, booties and the like are not cheap. Authors McGarry and Martin (p. 32) discuss the various issues that should be considered when implementing garbing standards for animal caretakers, and try to establish a sensible and economical approach to keeping both animals and staff safe and pathogen-free.

Authors Koehler *et al.* (p. 24) provide a frightening example of a surprising hidden danger in the animal facility. When researchers at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH noticed a sudden and dramatic change in experimental data—specifically, an increase in the number of mouse deaths and in chromosomal abnormalities in mouse oocytes used for studying meiosis—they were able to trace the source of the problem back to the cages they used to house their animals. The accidental, one-time exposure of polycarbonate cages and water bottles to a harsh alkaline detergent resulted in the release of an estrogen-like compound, bisphenol A, which is used in the production of this type of plastic. This event resulted in a ten-month suspension of animal studies in two laboratories until the source of the problem could be determined and eliminated.



Tanja Schub, Editor



Michael Eisenstein, Assistant Editor