

Animal experiments deserve a place on drug labels

Robert Winston

Drug development depends on preclinical experimentation in animal models. To make the public aware of the vital role of these studies, pharmaceutical companies should be legally obliged to make note of this on their products that came to fruition through animal research.



Robert Winston

Last year, more than 4 million procedures involving animals took place in Great Britain in a research context¹. Each experiment was subject to the stringently applied controls of this nation—one of the most strictly regulated sovereignties in the world—and virtually all of these legally permitted procedures had the potential to improve the treatment or prevention of disease. Despite these realities, strident demonstrations against vivisection in the UK continue, making companies that breed or transport these animals for research vulnerable to blackmail or intimidation. Individuals like me who conduct animal experiments sometimes have lectures picketed by protesters and occasionally receive shocking threats. In rare cases, we become the victims of violence. Moreover, some postgraduate students are reluctant to get involved in research involving vivisection because they fear it is thought reprehensible and because application for a license for such research is seen as a cumbersome process.

The pharmaceutical industry has a major need for animal research. Last year, some 80% of licensed animal experiments in the UK were conducted on rodents; about one-third of these were done in connection with drug research¹. But drug developers have been understandably reluctant to be too publicly visible in terms of animal research. They are well aware of the havoc that can be caused by protesters, particularly those who have been prepared to go outside the law to achieve their objectives.

A greater awareness of the value of animal experiments in medical research should help counteract this type of intimidation by antivivisectionists. Consequently, I introduced a bill into the House of Lords in the UK parliament that will be debated there for the first time on 25 October. The Medicinal Labelling Bill will require all manufacturers of drugs or vaccines to note on the product packaging when animal experimentation has been used at any stage in the development or testing of the product. This legislative act would demand a prominent packaging statement worded along these lines: “This pharmaceutical product has only been made possible by the use of research in animals.”

It is important to note that researchers and regulators have taken steps to use animal experiments only when crucially important. This is why the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986 concentrated on the ‘three Rs’: replacement, refinement and reduction. Replacement implied, for example, using bacteria, cell cultures or computer modeling where previously rodents might have been used; refinement meant ensuring that procedures cause far less stress to animals; and reduction set requirements for better experimental design to limit the number of animals needed to get meaningful results. In spite of the three Rs, the number of animals used in experiments has steadily increased, in part because of the flourishing of biomedical research and in particular because of advances in transgenic modification of animals. Ten years ago, around 2.7 million animal procedures were done annually in Britain; today, that number has grown about 50%.

Public awareness and appreciation of animal research in Britain has unfortunately not improved. A recent poll² conducted by the

London-based market research firm Ipsos MORI shows that whilst two-thirds of those polled supported the use of animals for medical research, around the same percentage felt they do not have enough information to form a solid opinion. Around 60% of responders said they felt they had little or no understanding of science or the science involved.

The object of the proposed Medicinal Labelling Bill is to encourage discussion and to ensure awareness and openness about animal testing. Such legislation would demonstrate the widespread nature of the need for animal research and increase recognition of its importance for medical progress in so many areas, such as heart disease, cancer, brain disorders and health problems associated with early life and with aging. Whether this bill becomes law or not, there is considerable parliamentary support for the discussion of its objectives.

One objection is that clear labeling may discourage people from taking drugs needed for their health. However, around a billion animals are slaughtered annually for food in the UK, and millions of people wear leather shoes and belts and carry leather handbags. Meat sales have not suffered as a result of animal rights activists, and the ethical case for safe drugs is much stronger than that for fashion accessories or a carnivorous diet.

Meanwhile, some members of the biomedical community have not yet come out in full force to support the bill. It’s not just the pharmaceutical industry that is reluctant to engage in debate; so are research universities, which also worry about being targeted by activists. Many senior administrators in both sectors are concerned that, as the scene is relatively peaceful at present, it would be unwise to stir up a hornets’ nest. But the current relatively quiescent state may not last: the recent Ipsos MORI poll shows that the percentage of people supporting the use of animal studies for medical research alone fell from 76% in 2010 to 66% in 2012.

Unfortunately, there is too little recognition even among lawmakers about the need for animal experiments. When unnecessarily stringent recommendations to reduce animal experiments were recently introduced in the European Parliament, British members of that governing body seemed uninformed and did not engage sufficiently in these debates. Even if it does not pass, my bill will help address these shortcomings, at least here in the UK, and ensure a level of awareness about a vital aspect of biological research in which the nation’s research workers excel.

Robert Winston is a professor of science and society and emeritus professor of fertility studies at Imperial College London, UK, and a Labour peer in the UK’s House of Lords since 1995. He can be found on Twitter @ProfRWinston.

1. UK Home Office. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212610/spanimals12.pdf (2013).
2. Ipsos MORI & UK Department for Business Innovation and Skills. http://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1512_sri-BIS_animal_research_2012_final_report_September_published_final.pdf (2012).