

Neuroscience meeting draws fire over Dalai Lama lecture

What business does the Dalai Lama have with neuroscientists?

When Tibet's exiled leader speaks at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) on 12 November, it won't be about the debate on Tibet's independence from China. But the lecture has stirred up a hornet's nest nonetheless.

Neuroscientists—many of them of Chinese descent—are calling into question the appropriateness of the Buddhist leader's presence there. Petitions for and against the lecture have circulated on the internet, bringing the debate to a wider—and perhaps more inane—audience.

From his home in Dharamsala, in northern India, the Dalai Lama has long cultivated a relationship with neuroscientists, particularly on the subject of meditation's effect on the brain. In October 2004, he hosted a conference on neuroplasticity, where an SfN member recruited him to speak at the meeting in Washington, DC.

The lecture is the first in a series called 'Dialogues between Neuroscience and Society'. "The spirit of the series is to examine legitimate areas for scientific inquiry that involve how the brain accomplishes the full range of observed behaviors," says SfN president Carol Barnes.

But critics say that the scientific venue is only a cover for the Dalai Lama's political and religious views. "I personally endorse basic research for higher brain functions including meditation, but the focus of public funds should be on potential medical benefit—not promoting religion," says University of Toronto researcher Min Zhuo.

Opponents also take aim at the scien-



Spiritual science: The Buddhist leader promotes research into meditation's effects on the brain.

tific credibility of research on meditation. Electroencephalograph recording experiments on meditating monks, recruited with the Dalai Lama's help, are not accurate in pinpointing brain activity during meditation, says Zhuo.

Last year, University of Wisconsin psychologist Richard Davidson published a high-profile paper showing that meditation can help coordinate the function of neural networks (*Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **101**, 16369-16373; 2004). But the results, which Davidson concedes are typical of an emerging field, have been controversial.

Northwestern University neuroscientist Yi Rao says the researchers used sloppy controls and are hiding their poor science behind a politically

correct mask. "Davidson has succeeded in making it difficult for objective scientists to criticize his substandard research by associating it with the symbolism of the Dalai Lama," Rao says.

Rao and others laid out their criticism in a petition to the SfN, asking that the lecture be canceled. The petition, posted online on 8 August, garnered 568 signatures over the next two days.

But 23 of the signatures belonged to supporters of the talk who were firing back. Robert Wyman, a developmental neurobiologist at Yale University, argued that the petition is the result of the Chinese stance on Tibet and noted that the vast majority of the first hundreds of signatures are Chinese names. "The opposition to the lecture is clearly political," he wrote.

Rao counters that 229 signatures are of scientists not of Chinese origin or descent. He also notes that there has been no response by the Chinese government or media to the debate.

The SfN received the petition on 15 August and promptly rejected it. In the meantime, a petition in support of the lecture also went online. The organization also received 114 letters in support of the lecture and 8 opposing it.

Meanwhile, the debate has caught the attention of many nonscientists. The petition against the lecture was taken over by pro-Tibet propaganda and the last pages of the one supporting the lecture is filled with names lacking affiliations to research organizations—though one identifies his as "*Homo sapiens*" and another as "I am that which I am becoming."

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Spanish flu papers put spotlight on 'dual use' decisions

The publication of the sequence of the 1918 flu virus in *Nature* and the virus' reconstruction in *Science* in October was a landmark in the view of many virologists. But it has also raised concerns that terrorists might recreate the virus. Critics say the case clearly illustrates how little the government can do to keep information that poses a biosecurity threat from getting published.

On 29 September, about a week before the papers were published, Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Michael Leavitt called a meeting of the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB), which advises the federal government on biosecurity issues.

"[Leavitt] decided that it would be prudent to have one more check done of the papers by the NSABB," says HHS spokesman Bill Hall.

The board concluded that the papers should be published because the benefits outweigh

the risks. But it recommended that the authors add a passage clarifying that the work was conducted safely. The authors complied—but they didn't have to. "Journals have the right to publish what they wish under the First Amendment," Hall says.

Phil Campbell, *Nature's* editor-in-chief, says he was happy to cooperate with the NSABB, but worries that the case could set a precedent for the government's increasing involvement in the publishing process.

Editors from top scientific journals agreed in a meeting in 2003 that they would voluntarily vet submitted papers for information that could be misused (*Nature* **421**, 774; 2003). In this case, *Science* asked the authors to talk to officials at US federal agencies. The magazine also consulted a couple of experts who regularly evaluate such papers, says editor-in-chief Donald Kennedy.

Editors at *Nature* say although their paper

went through the usual peer review, the journal did not consult additional biosecurity experts this time. *Nature* has previously published genomes of lethal pathogens, they note, and has consistently been advised that publication is in the public interest.

Concerns that bioterrorists could use the sequence to reconstruct the virus may be overblown, the researchers say. "It's not something you could do in your garage," says Jeffrey Taubenberger, lead author of the *Nature* paper.

Still, the NSABB realized that resurrecting a deadly virus would raise the public's concerns, says biosecurity expert Richard Ebright. Merely adding two sentences to a manuscript isn't enough to address their fears, he says, when the government has no authority to stop publication of research. "Can it really be true," he asks, "that the sole actions of the NSABB were to advise the authors of a PR problem?"

Andreas von Bubnoff, Washington, DC