

nature *neuroscience*

Activists threaten British neuroscience

Three years ago, Cambridge University announced an ambitious plan to build a new center for primate neuroscience research. But the proposed center suffered a major blow in February this year, when local authorities denied planning permission on the grounds that the likely protests by animal rights activists represented a threat to public order. Although the university expects to appeal the decision, the additional delay and uncertain outcome represent a serious setback to Cambridge's plans and to the future of systems neuroscience in Britain. It is also a testimony to the growing power of the animal rights movement to block the research agenda.

The Primate Research Center, which will cost about £24M, is intended to house several hundred marmosets and macaques, making it the largest such facility in the UK, and possibly in Europe. The aim of the center is to take advantage of the strong neuroscience and cognitive science community in Cambridge to explore higher brain functions that cannot be adequately modeled in rodents or other 'lower' species. The relevance to human psychiatric and neurodegenerative disease is obvious and substantial. But the proposed site, on the outskirts of Cambridge, has generated strong opposition in the community (including, regrettably, one of the nearby colleges of the university), and the plan must overcome a series of regulatory obstacles if it is ever to succeed. An earlier rejection on environmental grounds was overruled when the British government intervened to argue that the new center is important to the national interest. That argument, however, is not sufficient to overcome the latest rejection decision, which is based on police concerns, including the disruption of traffic, the threat to public safety, and the cost of policing the site in the face of non-stop protests.

These concerns seem well founded. British animal rights activists are among the most violent in the world, and Cambridge has become a center for their activities. Local protesters have recently been galvanized by a highly successful campaign against Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), a large company based about 30 miles from Cambridge which does contract research on animals, primarily for the pharmaceutical industry. HLS became the target of protests several years ago following a TV documentary that included clandestine footage of two HLS employees hitting a dog. Although the employees were dismissed, the protesters launched a sustained campaign against the company; its staff were harassed, homes and cars were vandalized, and last year the managing director was assaulted by three masked protestors wielding baseball bats. Even more damaging was an orchestrated campaign against financial institutions that invested in HLS, which caused many of them to pull out, bringing the company to the edge of bankruptcy before it was temporarily rescued by American investors.

The effectiveness of this campaign reflects the increasing sophistication of the animal rights movement. The loose structure of the movement allows its representatives to make veiled threats of civil

disorder while dissociating themselves from the violent incidents that give these threats their credibility. Moreover, the level of violence seems carefully calibrated—just enough to cause serious disruption to the research enterprise without triggering a major backlash of public opinion. The various groups are well coordinated via the internet, and this allows them to mobilize rapidly against their chosen targets. The coordination extends from Britain to the US; when HLS was bailed out last year by Stephens, Inc., a large investment bank based in Little Rock, Arkansas, the addresses of senior bank officials appeared on protest web sites, and their homes in Little Rock and New York were attacked. In January this year, after months of protests, Stephens finally pulled out, selling their investment to new backers who have not yet been identified.

British public opinion on animal research is divided, but polls show that support increases when the question is phrased to emphasize the connection between the research and its medical benefits. It is therefore worrying that one effect of violent protests is to suppress public discussion of this connection. Individual researchers faced with threats to themselves and their families are reluctant to be named, far less to step forward as public advocates for animal experimentation. Such reticence is understandable, but it allows animal rights activists to paint the researchers as 'faceless scientists' and to misrepresent their work, sometimes grotesquely, with little risk of public contradiction.

Moreover, the campaign of intimidation affects not only individual researchers but also the universities where they work. Opposition toward animal research is widespread among students, and not uncommon among academics in other disciplines. Even those who profess themselves supportive in principle may be reluctant to take a public stance; departmental administrators are understandably nervous about hiring colleagues whose work may draw unwanted attention, and universities are wary of publicizing their researchers' achievements through press releases or other public announcements, for fear of bringing activists to their campuses.

The danger, of course, is of a vicious spiral in which suppression of public discussion will lead to greater public ignorance and further erosion of support for animal research. Many British researchers believe that the situation has worsened in recent years. One researcher, frustrated with the extent of public antipathy and ignorance, suggested that a notice should be posted in every doctor's office: "Warning: your doctor may prescribe treatments that have been tested on animals. If you are not comfortable with this, you are advised to leave now." It will never happen, of course; too many patients would refuse treatment. But unless the research community can make a more effective case than it has so far done, the situation will continue to deteriorate. The battle over the Cambridge primate center is likely to continue for some time, and the eventual outcome will provide an important test of whether the research community can muster an effective response to its opponents.