

AUSTRALIA

Scientists oppose monkey import ban

Rush of protests against proposed Australian bill.

BY BIANCA NOGRADY

A bill calling for a ban on the import of non-human primates for medical research in Australia almost slipped under scientists' radar — but researchers have now rushed to argue against the proposal.

A Senate committee is considering the bill and will report in early March, before a possible debate and vote by the full Senate. That it is now publicly opposed by several scientific institutions worldwide is largely down to the efforts of neuroscientist Nicholas Price, who says that he was shocked to hear about it in late January.

Researchers had missed the legislative proposal when it was introduced in September 2015 as an amendment to Australia's federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. This was because the committee that deals with this legislation is not usually of interest to those in the medical-research community, says Price, who uses marmosets and macaques in experiments at Monash University's Biomedicine Discovery Institute in Melbourne. By the time he heard about the proposed ban, from another researcher, the window for public comment was days away from closing (although it was later extended). Price and his Monash colleagues James Bourne and Marcello Rosa began e-mailing researchers around the world, and institutions rushed to submit statements of opposition.

Senator Lee Rhiannon, a member of the Greens party who trained as a zoologist and introduced the proposal, told *Nature* that her party is not calling for a ban on non-human primates in research. The bill is a "modest" way to improve the welfare of research animals, she says. But Price and Bourne say that cutting off access to the genetic diversity required to maintain Australia's three main breeding colonies would eventually lead to inbreeding, health problems and the end of the country's research on non-human primates.

Australia's Parliament may be dissolved for a general election before the bill makes it to a vote — as happened to a similar bill that Rhiannon introduced in 2012. Price says that the events have convinced him of a need to be more public about the importance of his work. "We feel that the majority of the public would be very supportive," he says. ■

THOROUGHLY MODERN MILGRAM

A modern version of Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority avoids the ethical pitfalls of the classic 1960s studies.

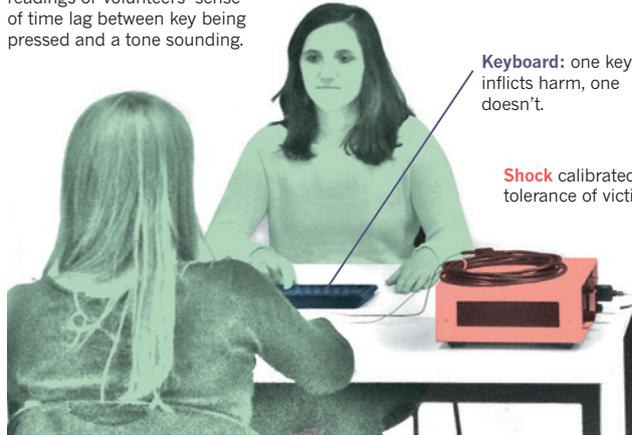
Volunteers knowingly inflict real pain: a cash fine and an electric shock, or just a fine. They take turns to be 'victim'.

Feelings probed using neural readings or volunteers' sense of time lag between key being pressed and a tone sounding.

Experimenter tells one volunteer which key to press — or turns away and offers a free choice of key press.

Keyboard: one key inflicts harm, one doesn't.

Shock calibrated to pain tolerance of victim.



ADAPTED FROM E. A. CASPAR ET AL. (2016)

PSYCHOLOGY

How the brain reacts to orders

Modern spin on iconic Milgram experiments suggests that people obeying commands feel less responsible for actions.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

More than 50 years after a controversial psychologist shocked the world with studies that revealed people's willingness to harm others on order, a team of cognitive scientists has carried out an updated version of these iconic 'Milgram experiments'.

The findings may offer some explanation for Stanley Milgram's uncomfortable revelations. When following commands, the team says, people genuinely feel less responsibility for their actions — whether they are told to do something evil or benign.

"If others can replicate this, then it is giving us a big message," says neuroethicist Walter Sinnott-Armstrong of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, who was not involved in the work. "It may be the beginning of an insight into why people can harm others if coerced: they don't see it as their own action."

The study may feed into a long-running legal debate about the balance of personal responsibility between someone acting under instruction and their instructor, says Patrick Haggard, a cognitive neuroscientist at

University College London, who led the work, published on 18 February (E. A. Caspar *et al.* *Curr. Biol.* <http://doi.org/bcnj>; 2016).

Milgram's work in the 1960s was motivated by the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi who argued that he was 'just following orders' when he sent Jews to their deaths. The latest findings don't legitimize harmful actions, Haggard emphasizes, but do suggest that the excuse of 'obeying orders' betrays a truth about how a person feels when acting under command.

In his experiments, Milgram told participants that a man was being trained to learn word pairs in a neighbouring room. The participants had to press a button to deliver an electric shock of escalating strength to the learner when he made an error; when they did so, they heard his cries of pain. In reality, the learner was an actor, and no shock was ever delivered. Milgram's aim was to see how far people would go when they were ordered to step up the voltage.

Routinely, an alarming two-thirds of participants continued to step up shocks, even after the learner was apparently rendered unconscious. But Milgram did not assess his