ANIMAL RIGHTS: RESPONSES TO
"THE DOMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE BY IGNORANCE"

by D. E. ErkenBrack
Central University of Iowa
Pella, IA 50219

Review of some of the recent social "revolutions" leading to a change in the general perception of society's responsibilities toward minorities, women or the environment yields a discernable pattern in such societal "sea changes". This appears to start with a committed and vocal minority which wins support for its view by capturing the attention of the media (sometimes by illegal activities) and keeping the issue in the public eye until politicians perceive that it has gained enough of a constituency to be worth addressing. In cases where the proponents of the status quo are not heard or seem ineffective, sweeping changes in law have been enacted resulting in reallocation of resources to programs more in line with the "new order" even if their efficacy is problematic. Most Americans, and even many academics, seem to feel that this scenario is a natural if not desirable mechanism for implementing needed social change. The potential for serious mistakes in public policy is often deemed too low to be worth concern. The more worrisome possibility that this political process may be abused by fomenting an artificial controversy for the primary purpose of raising funds from an ingenuous populace is frequently not even addressed.

There is no question that Humane Societies and other animal protection groups have historically served an important role in prompting professional scientific societies to implement and enforce responsible standards for animal use, especially regarding the elimination of unnecessary suffering. Unfortunately, these groups have almost always contained extremist factions which periodically succeed in mobilizing political support for more draconian restriction of the scientific utilization of animals. Some of the most striking examples of this occurred during the anti-vivisectionist movement of the last century (1).

It appears that the history of the animal protection movement has been one of intermittent periods of intense activity, initiated by specific (and generally sporadic) abuses and mollified by prompt and responsible redress by professional scientific societies. These events occurred in a general atmosphere of trust: the scientists were presumed to be genuinely committed to the exploration of the unknown and the relief of human suffering, viewing the use of animals as an unavoidable and unfortunate necessity; the societies were presumed to be primarily concerned with avoiding unnecessary animal suffering while accepting the validity of animal use in biomedical research. Since these goals are not mutually exclusive, consensus was eventually achieved.

The current resurgence of the so-called "animal rights" movement has elicited a similar initial response from the research community and the government agencies affecting it. There is an absolutely unprecedented level of control of research animal use, from the initial justification of a research proposal right up to the disposal of remains (2). The increasing cost of these measures is having constraining effects on biomedical research, decreasing the amount that can be done by consuming a sizable fraction of the available resources and even
making some important lines of inquiry prohibitively expensive (3).

Many would say this is an appropriate response to changing mores within our society, and this may be a defensible point of view. However, reviewing the changes which have already been implemented by professional scientific societies as well as the plethora of newly-enacted regulations protecting research animals from abuse leaves one with the impression that there is little more the research community can do to protect animals except stop using them altogether. Thus if the social concern is for respectful and humane treatment of research animals, one would expect the controversy to subside as a result of the responsible ways the scientific community has responded to this concern. But the controversy is escalating each year, almost each month. In advertisements, articles and editorial pages the public is persuaded that scientists routinely and cavalierly misuse lab animals (4)(5). Most recently, Ingrid Newkirk, national director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) who originally achieved notoriety for her oft-quoted “a dog is a rat is a pig is a boy”, left no doubt of the continued emphasis animal rights organizations place on the prohibition of animal use: “Even if animal research resulted in a cure for AIDS, we’d be against it” (6). Attention for this view is maintained by incidents of vandalism perpetrated in animal research laboratories: more than 29 incidents causing over $7 million dollars in damage since 1982 (1).

The consequences are already being felt in our society, and they have by no means run their course. Cosmetic companies are rapidly replacing animal product testing with substitutes of questionable reliability (7). Scientific research projects are being halted in midstream (8). Existing laws are misused: “freedom-of-information” suits brought against research review panels force disclosure of proposed experiments, making delay, interference and even sabotage much easier to accomplish (9); the “tactic of raising false issues of environmental safety in an attempt to stop animal research has been repeated across the country” (10). Local laws have been enacted in several (admittedly politically liberal) communities to abolish lab animal use, reminiscent of the nuclear-free zones of the last decade (11). Bills to effect similar restrictions on a national scale have been introduced in both houses of Congress (H.R. 560, 778 and 1676; S.727, 891 and 1457). Funding of two animal research projects was actually halted by the passage of H.R. 3072 which will go into effect in 1990. One of the most serious consequences imaginable is the loss of gifted young scientists from the biomedical research field, as noted by Dr. Frederick Goodwin of the National Institute of Mental Health: “My people speak more and more of fear and demoralization concerning their research and the necessity to use animals for meaningful and objective experiments. If you stop funding or drive up the costs by layers of regulation, nobody on the outside knows its happening. Research just quietly dies” (12).

Will meaningful biomedical research truly die if animal use is abolished? Cultured cells and computer analogs are chief among the research systems touted by the abolitionist movement as appropriate alternatives to animal use. Articles reporting this in the secondary literature (13,14) frequently fail to elucidate the substantive differences between animal use in basic research as opposed to product testing (15). Little if any attention is given to the almost

Thus we must face the fact that continued use of research animals, however well-justified or painless the protocols may be, is itself in contention; that is, that the animal welfare movement has become an abolitionist movement.
constant iteration in the primary literature of the facts that neither cultured tissue nor the level of sophistication extant in present computer technology affords sufficient complexity to model living organisms; heed is similarly denied the concomitant assertions that until this complexity is achieved, the need to continue animal work is absolute (16,17). This point does not seem overly difficult to grasp: the fact that it is continually ignored raises the question of the credibility of the abolitionist movement.

In the face of the tremendous contribution animal research has made to health care (18), it is difficult to understand first the fact that abolitionists have made it a target of their primary efforts, and secondly the success of those efforts to impede and discredit it. It is true that our society generally embraces a double standard toward animals (19) but it is also true that a thousand animals are exterminated in shelters and a million are slaughtered in abattoirs for each animal (90% are rodents) that dies in research. It is true that some lab animals die painfully (a vanishingly small fraction—again, virtually all rodents—involved in pain research) but millions of relatively sophisticated stray pet animals die regularly in shelters by egregiously inhumane methods involving carbon monoxide or dioxide, negative pressure, gunshot, etc. The most basic right is the right to life, but there is no outcry from 'animal rights' groups for compulsory sterilization of extant pets to preclude the necessity for the extermination of their progeny in shelters; instead much effort is expended to ensure that animals in shelters are killed there instead of being released to research (20).

The record thus does not support the claim that animal rights organizations are working sensibly and clearly toward goals pursuant to the eradication of animal suffering; by attacking biomedical research, they single out that facet of the controversy which uses by far the fewest animals for by far the most defensible purposes, while instances of indefensibly inhumane treatment on a much larger scale are being effectively ignored. Observing this inconsistency in the record, a scientist naturally begins to formulate hypotheses to account for it. Indications of a hidden agenda exist, but it is in fact hidden and requires some ferreting out and perhaps some inference. In the first place, surprisingly large annual budgets are controlled by animal protection organizations, well into the tens of millions of dollars (21). Secondly, the tenor or philosophy of these organizations is being subtly yet radically changed, with their well-earned reputation for moderation (with emphasis on humane use of animals) being kept as a facade to mask a much more activist abolitionist reality (22). Thirdly, those in opposition to these organizations such as the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR) and the Iowa Academy of Science Controversial Issues Committee are beginning efforts to effect the inclusion of animal protection groups under racketeering laws. This would make it easier to prevent the misuse of the sizable funds controlled by such organizations, which are mostly collected ostensibly for the purpose of promoting humane use, but which have begun to be employed to promote the abolition of all animal use (private communication).

"It is easier to believe a simple lie than to understand a complex truth". Alexander de Tocqueville's words indicate the manner in which professional Biologists should respond to this issue. Public ignorance is the difficulty and public education the answer. Daniel E. Koshland, editor of *Science*, has eloquently stressed our responsibility in this regard (23). Colleagues have published protocols for meeting this challenge (22). Other institutions have effectively precluded interference by taking the initiative instead of waiting for protest and passively reacting to it (24,25). Bills have been introduced in Congress to protect animal research (H.R. 3270, 3349; S. 727) which may be supported by letters from any citizen. Finally, as Dr. Ronald McLaughlin (Director of the Office of Laboratory
Animal Medicine of the University of Missouri at Columbia) writes:

"There probably isn’t a reader of this newsletter who doesn’t have the knowledge, the ability and the contacts to encourage some undecided person to support the use of animals in research and education. The majority of the United States population wants to support us. All they need is the information and encouragement to counter the misinformation of the animal rights activists and anti-vivisectionists" (26).

At our next AMCBT meeting I will propose a resolution that we formally commit ourselves to activities such as those described above. However, as our colleague Larry Horton points out, "Developing successful strategy and tactics would be a relatively easy task—not quite trivial, but not greatly difficult—provided that one condition is met: The issue must be truly recognized by scientists as serious enough to warrant their personal involvement on a priority basis" (1, emphasis his).

At the beginning of this century, at the climax of the then raging antivivisectionist controversy, Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi testified before a U.S. Senate committee considering anti-vivisection legislation, "I will speak (against) the fundamental vice of the bill...that its provisions are deliberately planned for the domination of knowledge by ignorance" (27). She and her colleagues won their fight. The legacy of freedom of inquiry they left makes it incumbent upon us to make sure that we do the same.

LITERATURE CITED

1. Journal of the National Cancer Institute, 81(10):736; 1989
2. Guide for the care and use of laboratory animals, NIH pub. No 86-23; 198
6. USA Today, 8 June 90, p.3A
8. Science 242:1001; 198
10. Science 242:840; 1988
15. Science VOLUME:148; April 1986
17. The Physiologist 31(4):57; 1988
18. Buffalo Physician 18:3; 1984
22. The Physiologist, 31(3):43; 1988
24. Science 244:17; 1989
25. Science 244:415; 1989