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Animal Rights: Reaching the Public

P. Michael Conn and James Parker

To paraphrase 18th-century statesman Edmund Burke, "all that is needed for the triumph of a misguided cause is that good people do nothing." One such cause now seeks to end biomedical research because of the theory that animals have rights precluding their use in research. Scientists need to respond forcefully to animal rights advocates, whose arguments are confusing the public and thereby threatening advances in health knowledge and care. There is little logic in emotional campaigns to end the practice of animal experimentation. A 1990 study found that although 63 percent of animal rights literature concerns the use of animals in science, such use each year involves 0.003 percent of the number of animals consumed for food. Only half as many animals undergo medical procedures in research as endure surgery ordered by pet owners for cosmetic reasons.* Faulty logic, however, may be good strategy. Leaders of the animal rights movement target biomedical research because it depends on public funding, and few people understand the process of health care research.

Roger Caras, president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, reported to a recent conference on Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research that most people just don't understand what health researchers do. Many are not old enough to remember how devastating childhood diseases used to be, for instance. Hearing allegations of cruelty to animals in research settings, they are perplexed that anyone would deliberately harm an animal.

For example, a grandmotherly woman staffing an animal rights booth at a recent street fair was distributing a brochure that encouraged readers not to use anything that comes from or is tested in animals—no meat, no fur, no medicines. Asked if she opposed immunizations, she wanted to know if vaccines come from animal research. When assured that they do, she replied, "Then I would have to say yes." Asked what will happen when epidemics return, she said, "Don't worry, scientists will find some way of using computers." Such well-meaning people just don't understand.

Scientists must communicate their message to the public in a compassionate, understandable way—in human terms, not in the language of molecular biology. We need to make clear the connection between animal research and a grandmother's hip replacement, a father's bypass operation, a baby's vaccinations, and even a pet's shots. To those who are unaware that animal research was needed to produce these treatments, as well as new treatments and vaccines, animal research seems wasteful at best and cruel at worst.

We have heard college-educated citizens testify to public agencies that we can advance health exclusively through epidemiology, cell culture, and computer simulation. We may bemoan such a lack of scientific sophistication, but we should leap at the chance to help people understand that epidemiologists can provide clues to the causes of disease but can't develop effective treatment; that, whenever they can, researchers do use cultured cells derived from animal tissue; and that scientists depend on computers for processing data that we already possess, but can't use them to explore the unknown in the quest for new information.

Much can be done. Scientists could "adopt" middle school classes and present their own research. They should be quick to respond to letters to the editor and op-ed pieces, lest animal rights misinformation go unchallenged and acquire a patina of truth. Research institutions could be opened to tours, to show that laboratory animals receive humane care. Finally, because the ultimate stakeholders are patients, the health research community should actively recruit to its cause not only well-known personalities such as Stephen Hawking, who has made courageous statements about the value of animal research, but all who receive medical treatment, perhaps through patient groups such as the Incurably Ill for Animal Research in the United States and the Seriously Ill for Medical Research in England. If good people do nothing, there is a real possibility that an uninformed citizenry will extinguish the precious embers of medical progress.

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* C. S. Nicoll, *Endocrinology* 127, 985 (1990).

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