Animal Rights Pressure on Scientists

This past July, when Michael Podell announced his decision to abandon his National Institutes of Health (NIH)–funded research program at Ohio State University (OSU) because of widespread and prolonged harassment from animal rights activists, the scientific community was deeply shaken. To see domestic terror campaigns being imported from the overseas animal rights movement is painful. A recent report from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project details the increasingly violent tendencies of U.S. animal rights activists, who have been adopting the extremist tactics used by similar groups in Britain. Three weeks before Podell's announcement, an animal rights conference held in Washington, DC, conducted workshops with titles such as "Direct tactics: economic, social, and religious pressure, physical intimidation, destruction." This leaves all of us who work with animals wondering who will be the next target. In the furor that followed Podell's departure—the accusations of blame, the gloating remarks of animal rights groups, the shock and dismay of scientists—there were some important facts that escaped the limelight.

The study led by Podell explored the synergistic effects of methamphetamine treatment and immunodeficiency virus on progressive neurodegeneration. The detrimental impact of immunodeficiency on neural tissue is a complex aspect of the disease that is poorly delineated, as is the mechanism of viral interaction with methamphetamine. Podell's research represents good science, based on sound hypotheses, developed with appropriate methods, and addressing a societal need. The global population of those infected with HIV who are also drug addicts is growing at an alarming rate. Comprehending the interactions of the lentivirus and tissues exposed to methamphetamines is critical to developing treatments and preventive measures. It is also true that our knowledge of the AIDS virus thus far could not have been achieved without the use of animal research. A symposium on nonhuman primate models of AIDS, held last month, clearly demonstrated how the study of SIV, the nonhuman primate equivalent of HIV, has contributed to our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of this ravaging disease. The primate model continues to be crucial to the development of an effective AIDS vaccine, although it is certainly not the only appropriate animal model. Podell's previous research illustrates how the feline disease, FIV, closely mirrors the neurodegenerative effects of HIV infection, making cats an excellent surrogate for HIV neuropathology.

U.S. animal rights activists are becoming increasingly violent.

Perhaps most important, the research was uncovering tantalizing new evidence about the effects of methamphetamine use on viral replication. Podell's findings, recently published in the *Journal of NeuroVirology*, plainly showed a manifold increase in neural cells' ability to replicate the immunodeficiency virus after methamphetamine treatment. The OSU study also shed light on the mechanism by which FIV associates with astrocytes, mutating into a strain of virus that does not depend on immune system interaction for replication. This important piece in the puzzle of how the viral load of FIV/HIV in the brain leads to dementia is vital to efforts to lessen this debilitating brain damage. Bringing this work to an abrupt end, just as it is so close to answering important questions about AIDS and drug abuse, would have been a tragedy. Fortunately, recognizing the importance of this research, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) worked with OSU to identify a team of well-qualified individuals to continue the valuable research begun by Podell.

Despite the uproar surrounding the award and the effort it took to identify suitable new primary investigators, NIDA chose to follow the NIH mission of funding cogent science that ultimately benefits public health. It should be lauded for its decision to go forward with the third year of funding previously granted to Podell. It undoubtedly would have been easier to quietly divert the funds to a less controversial project. It is to NIDA's credit that it did not succumb to the pressure of those who would seek an end to all animal research, to the detriment of human and animal health.

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