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I support vivisection but must we really kill 4million animals?

By DR DANNY PENMAN
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Vivisection polarises British society like almost no other issue. On the one hand, medical researchers claim that animal experiments are vital for human progress and the elimination of diseases. On the other, animal rights extremists say that scientists delight in 'torturing' animals for profit.

We want it both ways: we demand our life-saving pharmaceuticals but don't like to think too deeply about the animals they were tested upon.

Like most people, I would sacrifice the lives of countless lab animals to save my fiancée or other members of my family.

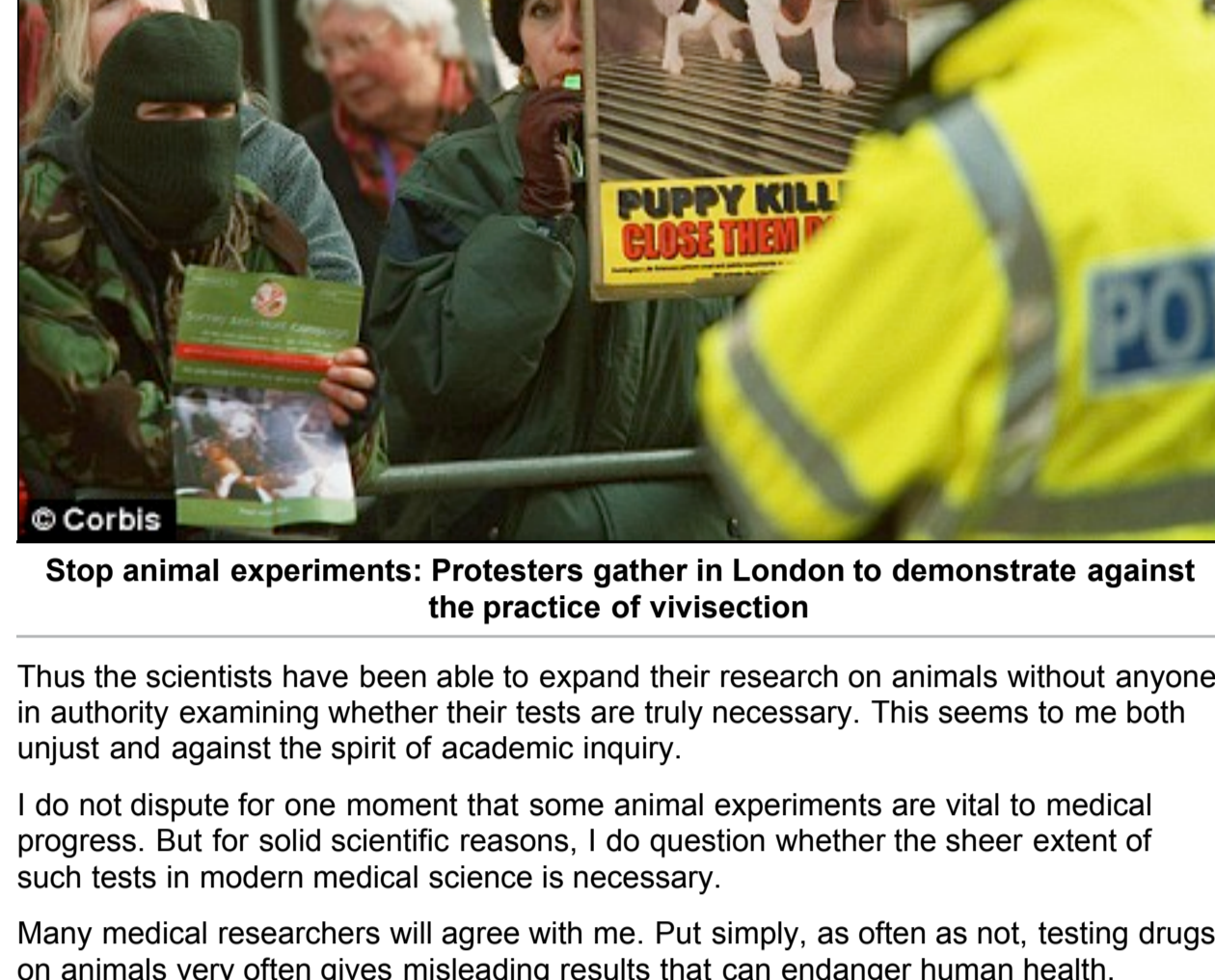


Nevertheless, I felt deeply uneasy yesterday when I learned that the number of animals used in experiments had increased by half a million in the past year alone.

A disturbing 3.7million animals are now used every year in British labs, more than in medical research. These figures come just three months after a ban on all cosmetics testing came into force across Europe.

As a former research biochemist, I find it perplexing that the cosmetics industry has managed to eliminate all animal testing whereas medical researchers rely on it more than ever. Why are there so many animal testing experiments when there are alternatives?

One reason, ironically, is that violence and intimidation by a handful of animal rights fanatics has clouded the debate. For if you question the work of scientists today, your risk being lumped together with the extremists.



Thus the scientists have been able to expand their research on animals without any authority examining whether their tests are truly necessary. This seems to me both unjust and against the spirit of academic inquiry.

I do not dispute for one moment that some animal experiments are vital to medical progress. But for solid scientific reasons, I do question whether the sheer extent of such tests in modern medicine is necessary.

Many medical researchers will agree with me. Put simply, as often as not, testing drugs on animals very often gives misleading results that can endanger human health.

This is not an extreme viewpoint. New Scientist magazine recently described the results of animal medical experiments as 'no more informative than tossing a coin'. I would not go that far myself, but I do believe that vivisection is, at best, unreliable and, at worst, lethal.

It is just not the case that the results of animal experiments can provide 'proof' that a new pharmaceutical will be safe for use on humans. Sometimes they do, but often they do not. This is because of the numerous biochemical, physiological and genetic differences between humans and animals.

A shocking example is the infamous Northwick Park incident of 2006. In that instance, you will recall, a group of six perfectly healthy young men became critically ill after being given the experimental drug TGN 1412.



This drug was designed to treat rheumatoid arthritis and leukaemia. It passed all of the animal tests without a hint of trouble. The drug was also tested on monkeys at doses 500 times greater than that given to the young men and, again, was shown to be 'safe'.

So the trial proceeded to the final stage, with tests on human volunteers. However, the young men became critically ill within minutes of being given the drug. One was reported as looking like the 'elephant man'. Another was plunged into a deep coma.

Nor was this case a one-off. The painkiller Vioxx sailed through all of the usual animal tests - but ended up causing between 88,000 and 160,000 heart attacks and strokes.

The damage it inflicted on the human heart was completely missed in the animal tests. The drug Opren, some HRT medicines and certain types of antidepressant - to list but a few - have all been linked to unexpected deaths.

It would be naive to claim that all medical researchers are behaving recklessly. Nevertheless, you have to question their judgment when it comes to vivisection, especially as there are now many alternatives that may provide far more reliable results.

New drugs can be screened using sophisticated robots that can test 1,400 different substances at once on cultures of living animal cells grown especially for this purpose. One robot, developed by scientists in the U.S., can screen 100,000 compounds a day.

If you need to test the effect of a substance on human skin, for example, you can now buy sheets of skin that were grown in a vat.



Recent breakthroughs mean that drugs can be developed and tested on human stem cells. Pharmaceuticals can also be screened on human tissue samples obtained from hospital operating theatres and morgues.

These are then 'grown' in the lab and used to test new drugs. Business is booming for the companies specialising in this area for one simple reason: it gives more reliable results.

Why then have medical researchers not followed their colleagues in the cosmetics business and begun to phase out vivisection? One of the major reasons is bureaucracy.

Before a drug or therapy can be marketed it has to be proved safe. Each country has its own licensing system with bureaucrats eager to maintain the status quo.

Vivisection is easy to understand and allows them to pass the buck - should things go wrong, regulators and researchers can deny responsibility by pointing out that the drug was tested on animals.

Ten years ago I discussed this issue with Professor Michael Balls, the head of the European Commission's research department, which had been tasked with developing alternatives to vivisection.

His laboratory had produced a number of non-animal tests. As a result, he told me, the number of all animals used in experiments could be cut by two thirds within a decade if the bureaucrats would abandon their insistence on vivisection.

Yet since that conversation, the number of animal experiments has actually increased by a third in Britain alone. That, to me, is a shocking indictment of our politicians.

They have allowed the medical establishment to dictate the terms of debate while sheltering behind the argument that the animal rights lobby are just deranged fanatics. I repeat, researchers deserve our admiration for seeking cures for diseases that blight so many lives.

But for all our sakes - not just the lab animals' - medical science should surely be encouraged to shape a future with less vivisection, not more.

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Isn't it utterly depressing that there are people who routinely kill animals in this way?
- Fred, Horsham, 23/7/2009 16:23
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So now the medics are confirming that animal testing is inefficient and The New Scientist says its useless... so why keep on doing it? There are other ways that this man has so clearly stated. Pure profit and a reluctance to accept they have been wrong for years. Dont donate to research without asking if they test on animals, you cant stop them using your taxes but you can give to humane research. Support Dr Hadwens Trust, excellent.
- Meg, Durham, 23/7/2009 15:07
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@ -observer, Germany

No amount of genetic engineering will turn a non-human animal into a human-being. The case for doing away with unreliable and also pointed out human death causing vivisection experiments has been made abundantly clear by the Dr author of this well balanced to both sides, well-researched DM article. Millions of sentient lab animals are continuing to die needlessly and horribly every year that goes by all because researchers like yourself are unwilling to move with the times and get with these more test data reliable 'alternatives to vivisection' programs. It's also about time too that politicians stopped letting the medical establishment dictate to them.
- Norma, England, UK, 23/7/2009 14:44
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As always this debate centres around "life saving medical research". It is still legal in the UK to torment any animal to death by forcing pesticides, industrial chemicals, artificial sweeteners, food additives, GM crops, cleaners ad infinitum into their bodies. Yes dogs and rats suffer a horrific fate just so some ignorant can use a "new improved" washing powder and give their children chemical ridden soft drinks. Hardly anyone acknowledges this outrage which is far removed from the nonsense about killing other animals to save killer apes. In fact the vast abundance of chemicals being ingested by humans does very little for our health
- Lynn Sawyer, Evesham Worcs, 23/7/2009 14:39
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Animal testing has long proven itself to be specious. Penicillin is, after all, lethal to Guinea Pigs....
- pat, Pennsylvania, USA, 23/7/2009 14:03
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You would expect that with all the information we have collected over the years that we could use computer simulation to test most medicines now, but of course computer programmers and developers are expensive to hire and animals are cheap and 'disposable'.
- BillyBob, London, 23/7/2009 13:08
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- JAMES SLACK: £1 for a line of cocaine - so much for the war on drugs
- STEPHEN GLOVER: How our cultural elite rejects middle-class values and censors debate
- RICHARD O'HAGAN: Hatch and match plan drags Church into the 21st century
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Yes No | VOTE

All polls

TODAY'S POLL

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Yes No | VOTE

All polls

TODAY'S POLL

Should victims and their families be expected to forgive terrorists?
Yes No | VOTE

All polls

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Should we reduce the number of experiments carried out on animals?
Yes No | VOTE

All polls

TODAY'S POLL

Should we holiday in this country to stop the spread of swine flu?
Yes No | VOTE

All polls

TODAY'S POLL

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Yes No | VOTE

All polls

TODAY'S POLL

Do you sit down to eat with your family every day?
Yes No | VOTE

All polls

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- FRANK SKINNER: Imaginary guitar is the airway to heaven (The Times)
- TERENCE BLACKER: The mad democracy of snooping (Independent)
- PHILIP COLLINS: Can you change sides in the class war? (The Times)
- ZOE WILLIAMS: Our ageing world isn't a catastrophe - it's a triumph (Guardian)
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U.S. Department of Transportation

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