



SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH TARGETED BY ANTI-ANIMAL TESTING ACTIVISTS

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A proposed law could affect animal activists who use extreme tactics that some scientists and lawmakers say go too far and stand in the way of scientific progress.

Three animal rights activists were sentenced to four to six years in prison last month for stalking and intimidating employees of a company using animals for laboratory research.

The activists are part of an animal liberation movement aimed at stopping animal testing, with the belief that it is cruel and that animals should have the same rights as humans.

Activists who commit crimes

Legislation under review in Congress -- the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act -- would strengthen the law used to prosecute these activists and provide more protection for individuals with any ties to institutions that conduct animal testing.

Donald Kennedy, editor-in-chief of Science magazine, wrote in a September editorial that the new bill should be put to a vote "as soon as possible, before somebody gets killed."

Extreme animal activist groups claimed responsibility for 1,200 crimes between 1990 and mid-2004, according to the FBI.

The work of peaceful animal activist groups to create awareness about animal testing and alternatives has been overshadowed in recent years by the work of more extreme groups.

Scientists under fire

Extreme groups' tactics include listing addresses and phone numbers of researchers on Web sites and encouraging people to harass them. Scientists have reported receiving death threats and hate mail.

In August, Dario Ringach, a neurobiology professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, decided to stop his research on primates because he feared for his family's safety.

Ringach was using monkeys in vision experiments for information processing research.

He received threats and pressure from a group called the Animal Liberation Front. After the ALF targeted another UCLA researcher's home with a home-made bomb, Ringach sent the group an e-mail saying, "You win."

A statement from UCLA after the incident said using "violent tactics aimed at halting animal research is to take away hope from millions of people with cancer, AIDS, heart disease and hundreds of other diseases."

In England, where the animal testing debate has been especially heated, activists succeeded in suspending construction of an animal research facility at Oxford University by using threats and destroying university property. The project has since resumed, but large scale protests have kept the university on edge.

Other animal rights approaches

Extreme activists are a small but visible part of the much larger campaign against using animals in testing.

Animal rights groups try to educate the public about conditions and procedures animals are exposed to during testing. Some lobby the government to strengthen regulation of animal testing and work with scientists to develop alternatives.

Undercover investigations done by groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, have exposed animal abuse and torture in some laboratories.

PETA also runs ad campaigns and conducts other outreach, and has had particular success reaching the 13-24 age group.

"We reach out to youth and let them know how powerful their voice can be," said Lisa Lange, vice president of communications for the group. "We don't just address cruelty, we address the reasons [animal testing] doesn't work."

Animal testing

In the United States, an estimated 25 million vertebrate animals -- those with backbones -- are used each year in research, testing and education, according to the Humane Society.

Almost all the animals used in testing are eventually euthanized.

Animals are used in medical testing because they have biological similarities with humans and are a way to gauge a living being's reaction to a treatment or process.

For example, pigs have cardiovascular systems that are similar to that of a human, so they are used to test heart medications. Genetic disorders are often studied using mice, which share 98 percent of their DNA with humans.

Looking for better solutions

Animals are not perfect models for testing human treatments, however, and there have been cases where human reaction to a medication is wildly different from the test results on animals.

"Many researchers have found that when you use animals that are in distress and pain the result won't be accurate," said Betsy Nessen Merrill, director of communications at the Johns Hopkins Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing.

There is hope that eventually animals will not be necessary in labs, and that new ways of researching and testing will be even more effective.

Already, computers can be used to create virtual cells, tissues and organs. Real tissues can be grown in labs and more powerful scanning techniques are being used to get better insight into the human body.

Scientists working on finding alternatives to animals operate on the three R's: replacement, reduction and refinement. Replacement is the ultimate end goal. Reduction is finding ways to reduce the number of animals used and refinement is finding ways to reduce pain for the animals.

There is some concern among scientists that alternatives to animal testing will make it harder to make advances.

"Some scientists think you are going to take a step backwards," Merrill said. "What we are trying to do is use the latest techniques to do the best science in a humane way."

-- *By Talea Miller, NewsHour Extra*

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