

Letters

Animal Models: Inefficient in Advancing Human Healthcare

Dear Editor,

It was refreshing to read that Simon Festing, Director of the UK Research Defence Society (RDS) — an organisation which advocates animal experimentation — had effectively abandoned the position that “*virtually every medical achievement of the last century has depended directly or indirectly on research with animals*” (1), following Robert Matthews’ detailed demolition of this claim in a recent issue of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2). The RDS had previously sought the signatures of medical professionals on a petition citing this statement.

Less encouraging was the assertion that this statement has not, after all, been frequently used by advocates to support animal experimentation. A simple Google search reveals just how frequently this statement has, in fact, been used.

More disturbing was the RDS position that “*Animal research is morally and scientifically defensible, whether it has contributed to some, many or virtually all medical advances of the last century*”. Whilst such a statement rings with popular appeal, it is surprising that the author apparently assumed it would not be subjected to a somewhat more critical assessment by the readership of the *Journal*.

It is almost universally accepted as a principle of Good Laboratory Practice that animal experiments should to be subjected to a cost–benefit analysis by institutional ethics committees, and approved only when the expected human or animal benefits are reasonably likely to exceed the costs incurred — both economic and to the animals. Such unqualified support for animal experiments — of any kind — if animal experiments have *ever* contributed toward medical advances, accords no value to the lives of the animals involved, or to the considerable resources consumed within animal experiments — an issue of

no small importance, given the ever-increasing competition for scarce research resources.

It may indeed be the case that animal experiments have — on occasion — contributed toward human medical advances. Given the millions of such experiments that have been conducted, it is virtually inevitable that such links will exist. However, that fact does not make animal experimentation an efficient strategy for the development of cures for human diseases, nor does it make it ethically justifiable. In fact, at least 25 systematic reviews of the utility of large numbers of animal experiments have demonstrated that they are generally insufficiently predictive of human outcomes to be able to contribute significantly toward meaningful advances in human healthcare, or even to provide reliable predictions of human toxicity or safety (3).

Andrew Knight
Animal Consultants International
91 Vanbrugh Court
Wincott Street
London SE11 4NR
UK
E-mail: info@animalconsultants.org

References

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- ³ Knight, A. (2007). Systematic reviews of animal experiments demonstrate poor human clinical and toxicological utility. *ATLA* **35**, 641–659.