

Plunging underground in search of truth

"GUILTY!" roared the judge, as his gavel crashed into the podium, the curls of his wig shaking with recoil. After years of pushing the limits, the inevitable had finally come to pass.

I had been convicted at last – along with the entire back row – of crimes against fashion. Summarily ejected toward the grim torture chamber, we awaited our fates.

We were, nevertheless, somewhat more fortunate than the old lady in the front row – who reminded me vaguely of one of my lecturers.

Convicted of witchcraft, she was sentenced to Death by Fire. Or the gentleman toward the right of our motley tour group, who had been convicted of cross-dressing. Given the choice between the noose and banishment to Wales, he hastily chose the noose.

Whilst never entirely smooth sailing, it appeared my veterinary career had plunged to hitherto unknown depths. Some 50 feet below the cobbled stones of the old quarter of Edinburgh, in fact – if the dank and dripping rocks, from which echoed the occasional scream, were anything to go by.

Somehow, my conscientious attempts to pursue my continuing education had led me to a particularly untimely end, in the depths of the

Edinburgh Dungeon. As with most institutions of the UK government, the queues for the torturer were long. To ward off the cold, whilst I waited my turn, I recalled the steps that had led me there.

Heated debate

I had been attending the International Primatological Society annual congress

in August, at which a heated debate was raging. Seeking to counter rising international opinion against invasive experiments on chimpanzees, the heads of several US primate research centres had recently begun extolling the alleged benefits of such research, calling for increased funding for their institutions.

Unsurprisingly, however, their passionate claims that such research has been essential in combating major human diseases were rather lacking in evidence.

It was with pleasure, therefore, that I presented the results of my recent systematic review of 95 randomly-selected, published, invasive chimpanzee studies (available at www.peh-med.com/content/3/1/16).

It appears that a full 50% of published chimpanzee experiments are never cited by any future publication. Given that much research of lesser quality remains unpublished, this indicates that the majority of invasive chimpanzee studies generate data of questionable value, which make little obvious contribution toward the advancement of biomedical knowledge.

Furthermore, none of these chimpanzee studies made an essential contribution, or, in a clear majority of cases, a significant contribution of any kind, toward papers describing methods efficacious in combating human diseases.

Extensive similarities

The animal welfare, bioethical and financial costs inherent to invasive chimpanzee studies are profound. US physician Hope Ferdowsian, who has experience of treating torture survivors, also presented her study documenting the extensive behavioural and psychopathological similarities between her tortured humans and ex-laboratory chimpanzees.

Clearly, the approval of large numbers of these experiments, despite their demonstrable lack of benefit, indicates a serious failure of the ethics committee system.

Such results have increased the temperature of the international debate about the merits of invasive great ape experimentation. Legislative or policy bans or restrictions already exist in seven European countries, Australia and New Zealand, and the Spanish parliament decided to move

toward a national ban in June.

Within the UK, special justifications for great ape experiments became necessary under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, and a policy ban was introduced by the Home Office in 1997. It is likely that pan-European restrictions will shortly be introduced under the current revision of

European Directive 86/609/EEC, which governs laboratory animal use within EU member states.

And the introduction of The Great Ape Protection Act to the US

Congress in April may well herald the beginning of the end for invasive great ape experiments internationally. This would effectively result in the first global moratorium on invasive experiments on any non-human species, unless conducted in the best interests of the individual or species.

Chilling documentation

The over-riding theme of this congress, however, was a chilling documentation of the rapid global decline of our closest living relatives.

Around half of all primates are now threatened or endangered, thanks primarily to the wholesale destruction of their tropical forest habitats. "Bushmeat" hunting and viral spread also play a role.

Displaying our usual staggering lack of appreciation of the rarity and value of other complex life-forms within the known universe, we appear to be hell-bent on increasing their rarity further still.

All too soon, however, my reverie was ended. With one long, grimy fingernail, the black-masked torturer beckoned me forward, as a final scream faded from the clammy fog that passed for air, deep below the streets of Edinburgh. He introduced me to a variety of interesting tools of his trade, some of which resembled certain orthopaedic instruments with which I was familiar, albeit rather larger and rustier than those I had encountered in even my worst locum placements.

Most worrisome was the "chappy chopper", which oddly resembled a miniature guillotine. Impressed by my apparent interest, this considerate professional offered me a choice: he could cut out my tongue or excise something even more personal.

Needless to say, I chose my tongue. Continuing education can be tough, I thought, but at least I'll be able to decline the practice phone!



ANDREW KNIGHT continues his series on CPD the hard way with a report on his visit to a famous dungeon

Around half of all primates are now threatened or endangered

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London-based veterinarian Andrew Knight is the president of Animals Count, a political party for people and animals (www.AnimalsCount.org).