

Battle over animal rights: scientists and animal-rights activists clash over the use of animals for medical research.(Current Events: Special Report).

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## Full Text :

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Outside a medical research laboratory, a handful of animal-rights activists gather for a protest. Some wear animal masks and carry signs. Their signs read "Stop Animal Torture" and "Suffering for Science."

They are protesting the laboratory's use of monkeys and mice for medical research. The demonstrators believe that animals have rights and that it is wrong for humans to experiment on them.

Inside the laboratory, scientists are testing a new cancer drug on the animals. The scientists feel their work with animals is the only way of learning new and better ways of saving human lives.

Scientists and animal-rights activists have battled for years over whether such medical research is necessary or just plain cruel.

Each year in the United States, approximately 20 million laboratory animals are used in medical experiments. Scientists study a variety of animals in searching for cures and treatments for human illnesses from the common cold to cancer.

Rats and mice are used to study cancer, Alzheimer's and other diseases. Dogs are used to study treatments for diabetes and heart disease. Monkeys are involved in experiments to study AIDS and head injuries.

### ANIMAL RIGHTS

Animal-rights supporters say that many experiments on animals are needless and cruel. These supporters are generally divided into two groups: animal-rights activists and animal-welfare supporters. Animal-rights activists seek to end all testing involving animals. Animal-welfare supporters are not opposed to all experiments involving animals but work to ease any suffering of animals used in research. Supporters of animal rights agree that animals have a basic right to live lives free from unnecessary pain and early death.

From its beginning about 20 years ago, the animal-rights movement in the United States has grown immensely and become increasingly more vocal. Approximately 7,000 animal protection-groups, with a combined membership of about 10 million people, operate in the United States.

More extreme animal-rights groups will go to great lengths to support their cause. Activists have broken into labs in order to set animals free, destroyed research, and even set fire to research facilities. According to the Foundation for Biomedical Research in Washington, D.C., more than 60 such terrorist attacks by animal-rights groups have been mounted since 1982.

### MEDICAL RESEARCH

The claims of animal-rights activists, however, do not go unchallenged. According to the Foundation for Biomedical Research, animal research is essential to fighting diseases such as AIDS, cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, and other illnesses.

"Virtually every major medical advance for both humans and animals has been achieved through research using animal models and testing," writes former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop. Researchers contend that vaccines and antibiotics used to treat infections would not have been discovered and surgical techniques would not have been learned without the use of animal testing. "We're trying to make animal life, human life, and plant life better," says Karen Sokol, a veterinarian who conducts experiments on animals. "Unfortunately, [animal research] is all we have right now."

Without the use of animals in research, many doctors and scientists say, treatments or cures for tuberculosis, polio, diabetes, cystic fibrosis, smallpox, and other life-threatening diseases would not exist.

Supporters of animal research also claim that medical research involving animals benefits animals as well as humans. Many medicines and treatments developed for humans, such as antibiotics and surgery techniques, are now used on animals as well. Feline leukemia, rabies, and other vaccines were discovered through animal research, scientists say.

### ANIMAL WELFARE ACT

In 1966, the government responded to pressure from animal-rights groups by passing the Animal Welfare Act. The law set legal standards for the treatment and care of laboratory animals, except for rats and mice. The Animal Welfare Act states that all research facilities using animals must register with the government and be subject to random inspections. The act requires that animals used in experiments be given pain medication if they are likely to suffer pain. Research involving the study of human pain does not require the use of pain medication, however. For example, in an experiment to research pain relief for cancer patients, pain medicine is not given to any animals involved.

The Animal Welfare Act also requires a research facility to set up a committee to monitor its treatment of animals. A veterinarian and one person not associated with the research facility must be on the committee. Since 1966, Congress has passed three amendments to the act, most recently in 1991.

Over the past 20 years, the number of animals used in medical research in the United States has declined significantly. According to the Foundation for Biomedical Research, the overall use of animals in research has declined by 20 to 50 percent. Studies suggest that as many as 50 million animals were used each year before 1970. The current number of animals used for medical research each year is 17-22 million, reports the foundation. The majority of these animals

studied are mice and rats, scientists say. Animal-rights activists charge that the number of animals used each year could be as high as 70 million.

#### ALTERNATIVES

The main reason for the decline in animal research is the development of alternative testing methods. For some types of experiments, scientists now use computer programs, mechanical models, or human tissue cultures instead of live animals. However, many scientists say that those methods cannot currently replace all animal research. Many scientists say that computer models or tissue cultures do not provide a complete picture of how a new medicine will behave in a living body. "No computer program or alternative method can duplicate the functions of an entire living system," says one researcher. "We just don't know enough about human life yet to duplicate it accurately," he continues. Scientists report that using animals in research is difficult and expensive and alternatives are used whenever possible.

Animal-rights advocates disagree. They believe that alternative methods could be used far more often. If scientists were unable to use laboratory animals, activists say, scientists would be forced to find new ways of conducting medical research. "Animal research diverts money from more productive research areas," says Ingrid Newkirk of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the largest animal-rights organization in the United States.

Activists contend that the use of computer models and tissue cultures would also provide scientists faster, more accurate results. For example, the "Crash Test Dummies" used by car manufacturers to test auto safety provide more reliable results than the monkeys who were previously used for the crash tests.

In many instances, different animals will respond to the same drug in different ways, making animal research time consuming and wasteful of animals, activists claim. "Drugs react differently in humans than they do in animals," says Dr. Ron Alison. "It's like putting parts from a Ford into a Sherman tank," he says. "This makes research with animals flawed."

According to Alison, non-animal experiments allow scientists to test larger samples in a shorter period of time. The animal-rights movement continues to grow in the United States, as does opposition to it within the scientific community. Until scientists develop and perfect alternative methods to animal testing, the battle between animal-rights activists and medical researchers will continue.

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What are "rights"? Do animals have rights? Do people have a right to use animals for experiments? Why or why not?

RELATED ARTICLE: Animal Rights

#### Background

Many people say that the modern animal rights movement began in the early 1970's with the publication of Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation*. In his book, Singer asserts that animals have an inherent right to live lives naturally and free from unnecessary pain at the hands of humans.

Singer described the philosophy of many animals rights adopted by many animal rights groups: "We are opposed to arbitrary discrimination; it is wrong to inflict needless pain on another being."

Singer defined the mistreatment of animals as "speciesism," the belief that the interests of one species are more important than the interests of others. Singer compared speciesism to racial or ethnic discrimination among humans. "If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans for the same purpose?"

The book gives detailed, documented accounts of scientific experiments and farm practices. *Animal Liberation* exposed to many people for the first time to what actually occurs at research facilities, farms, and slaughter houses.

#### DOING MORE

Ask students for a show of hands. How many students support the use of animals in medical research? How many do not? Have students debate their opinions.