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The Royal Society: Media Releases

The use of animals in research

28 January 2002

The Royal Society is the world's oldest scientific academy, having been at the forefront of enquiry and discovery since its foundation in 1660. The backbone of the Society is its Fellowship of the most eminent scientists of the day, elected by peer review for life and entitled to use FRS after their name. Throughout its history, the Society has promoted excellence in science through its Fellowship, which has included Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Ernest Rutherford, Albert Einstein, Dorothy Hodgkin, Francis Crick, James Watson and Stephen Hawking. The Society is independent of government, as it has been throughout its existence, by virtue of its Royal Charters. The objectives of the Royal Society are to:

- recognise excellence in science;
- support leading-edge scientific research and its applications;
- stimulate international interaction;
- further the role of science, engineering and technology in society;
- promote education in the sciences and actively engage the public in scientific issues;
- provide independent authoritative advice on matters relating to science, engineering and technology;
- encourage research into the history of science.

The Council of the Royal Society, the UK national academy of science, today (28 January 2002) publishes a joint statement about the use of animals in research.

The statement points out that everybody has benefited immensely from scientific research involving animals and that virtually every medical achievement in the past century has depended directly or indirectly from this type of work. Nonetheless, researchers should seek, where possible, to avoid the use of animals and must advance sound scientific arguments for their use, explaining in proposals for research why no realistic alternative exists.

It goes on to emphasise that the number of animals used in an experiment must be kept to the minimum necessary to give a statistically valid result. Using too few animals can be as wasteful as using too many, but numbers can be kept down through good experimental design.

Professor Patrick Bateson, Vice-President and Biological Secretary of the Royal Society, said: "The Council of the Royal Society is issuing this statement because we want to maintain and strengthen an ethical approach to the use of animals in research through discussion and debate. We condemn illegal activities aimed at stopping all medical research with animals."

The statement stresses that the Society's journals accept papers describing work with vertebrate animals only if the procedures used are clearly described and comply with UK legislation. Referees are required to express any ethical concerns they may have about the animal experimentation under review, and papers are accepted for publication only if they are considered to be ethically sound.

The full text of the statement follows. The Society will be presenting oral evidence to the House of Lords Animal in Scientific Procedures Committee on 29 January 2002.

Statement of the Royal Society's position on the use of animals in research

We have all benefited immensely from scientific research involving animals. From antibiotics and insulin to blood transfusions and treatments for cancer or HIV, virtually every medical achievement in the past century has depended directly or indirectly on research on animals. The same is true for veterinary medicine. Modern biology, with all its contributions to the wellbeing of society, is heavily dependent on research on animals. Along with the great majority of the scientific community, the Royal Society considers that the benefits provide the justification for the research that led to them. At the same time,





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the Society also recognises that special ethical considerations are involved and that animal research must be undertaken only with the greatest care.

All possible measures must be taken to minimise the suffering of animals used in research. The Society strongly endorses the principle of the 'three R's' (which are enshrined in UK legislation). This means that every effort must be made: to replace the use of live animals by non-animal alternatives; to reduce the number of animals used in research to the minimum required for meaningful results; and to refine the procedures so that the degree of suffering is kept to a minimum.

Current UK legislation requires all researchers who propose to undertake laboratory or field work involving animals to give full consideration to the three Rs and to seek independent advice from a local ethics committee. Researchers should seek, where possible, to avoid the use of animals and must advance sound scientific arguments for their use, explaining in proposals for research why no realistic alternative exists. The number of animals used in an experiment must be the minimum necessary to give a statistically valid result. Using too few animals can be as wasteful as using too many, but numbers can be kept down through good experimental design. The Society believes that it is important to ensure research is of the highest quality in every area of science. Such considerations apply with special force where the lives and welfare of animals are being considered. All research on animals should, therefore, be subjected to rigorous independent peer review in order to ensure the validity of both the approach and problem, and thereby promote an environment conducive to excellent science.

The Society requires that the research it supports, in the UK or overseas, is carried out in the spirit of the UK legislation as well as complying with all local legislation and ethical review procedures. For publication in the Society's journals, papers describing work with vertebrate animals will be accepted only if the procedures used are clearly described and comply with the UK legislation. In addition, referees are required to express any ethical concerns they may have about the animal experimentation under review. Papers will be accepted for publication only if they are considered to be ethically sound.

The Royal Society takes an active role in policy discussions on the use of animals in research with numerous bodies including government, funding agencies, charities and discussion forums. It provides support for international efforts to improve conditions for laboratory animals. The Society condemns activities that break the law in pursuit of a particular position, but it welcomes attempts to maintain and strengthen an ethical approach to the use of animals in research through discussion and debate.

Other relevant Royal Society Reports

- European Commission's white paper 'Strategy for a future chemicals policy' (5 page response to the inquiry by the House of Lords European Union Committee, July 2001)*
- The use of Animals in Research (3 page response to the inquiry by the House of Lords ad hoc Animals in Scientific Procedures Committee, June 2001)*
- The use of genetically modified animals (46 page document, May 2001, ISBN 0 85403 556 7)*
- Cost/Benefit Assessment and the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (7 page response to the Animals Procedures Committee consultation, March 2001)*

* The full text, or summary of these reports can be found on the Royal Society's web site under science policy (www.royalsoc.ac.uk)

Further copies of these reports can be found obtained from:

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