

Understanding What Charities Say about Animal Experiments

PHYSICIANS COMMITTEE FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE

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As many health charities make their no-animal-experiments policies explicit, those that still fund animal experiments often try to counter criticism of their actions. The charities funding animal experiments make statements expressing concern for animal well-being, discuss accreditation purporting to indicate humane care, point out that they follow federal regulations governing the use of animals, or argue that the use of animals in experiments is necessary. Unfortunately, these statements are empty platitudes.

WHAT HEALTH CHARITIES SAY

Here are some standard phrases which merit a critical look:

“Our animals are well treated. . .”

In 1997, an American Red Cross (ARC) representative wrote, “Animals used in our laboratory work are well treated and not tortured in any way.” Yet, ARC has funded studies in which genetically-altered mice were allowed to develop ailments including neural tumors, gastrointestinal tissue malformations, shaking tremors, seizures, and paralysis.¹⁻³ In another ARC-funded experiment, rabbits had 22 to 30 percent of their blood volume bled every two weeks. Invasive experiments such as these clearly cause stress and suffering for animals. Even routine caging, isolation, handling, and shipping are terrifying for animals. It is difficult to imagine what ARC means when it says the animals in their experiments are “well treated.” However, ARC is not alone in making such statements; specious claims like these are common among charities that fund animal experiments.

“Our standards for the treatment of animals meet or exceed all federal regulations regarding animal care and use. . .”

The Animal Welfare Act (AWA), the primary federal legislation “protecting” animals, does not apply to mice, rats, and birds. These animals are used in 80 to 90 percent of all experiments, yet they are given absolutely no protection. Even for animals to which the AWA applies, the regulations in place are sorely deficient. Indeed, federal regulations do not prevent any experimental procedure, regardless of how painful it may be. Animals are repeatedly burned, maimed, and killed without anesthesia in federally “approved” laboratories. While the AWA

encourages the use of pain killers, experimenters are free to omit their use if they so choose.

“Our institution is accredited by the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International (AAALAC), an independent, non-profit organization which is the accepted standard of excellence for the humane care and use of laboratory animals. . .”

Like government regulations, AAALAC accreditation fails to provide any real protection for animals. AAALAC has even officially stated that it approves of multiple, major invasive procedures on individual animals. AAALAC prescribes standard procedures for monitoring and conducting animal experiments, but accreditation does not ensure that animals are well treated. For example, highly invasive surgeries on pregnant baboons are being conducted at AAALAC-approved laboratories at Cornell University. In one experiment, the baboons had catheters implanted deep in their thighs, electrodes sunk into their uteruses, and catheters inserted into the fetuses developing inside them. This extensive instrumentation was kept in the animals around the clock, causing extreme stress and suffering. Unfortunately, experiments of questionable clinical relevance that result in extreme animal suffering are routinely carried out in AAALAC-approved laboratories.

“Most of the animals we use are mice and rats. . .”

While this may be true, it is difficult to understand the relevance of this fact for those concerned with the ethics or effectiveness of animal experimentation. Both mice and rats have highly developed central nervous systems, feel pain, and suffer from the stress of confinement. Indeed, because mice and rats are “unpopular” animals and are not protected under the Animal Welfare Act, they are more likely to be used in invasive experiments. Rats and mice differ markedly from humans in many respects, making results from experiments on these animals difficult to extrapolate to humans. Studies in rats on heart disease, cancer, and stroke (the top three causes of death in the U.S.) are all plagued with problems because of the myriad differences in rat and human physiology. Tests in rats and mice agree only 70 percent of the time; the results would apply to humans even less often. Rats do not even develop the same range of cancers as humans.

"All research protocols are approved by our Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). . ."

Approval by an IACUC gives no indication of whether animal experiments involve pain or stress. IACUCs routinely approve highly invasive, painful procedures. Unfortunately, many committee members are animal experimenters or persons affiliated with the testing institution who "rubber-stamp" experimental protocols, even when they have little relevance to clinical medical practice.

A panel composed of seven former IACUC members from various institutions, with which PCRM consulted in 1994, cited numerous proposals which caused suffering for animals and had little scientific merit, but were nevertheless approved by IACUCs. One involved castrating rabbits and/or giving them estrogen to study erectile problems. Another experiment involved euthanizing horses as part of an effort to study exercise-induced bleeding in race horses. In other approved experiments, substances were administered to animals until 50 percent of them died; cocaine was given to pigs and piglets; and pigs were bled to the verge of death and revived.

"We promote the use of alternatives to animal research whenever possible. When animals are required, we use as few as we can. Our researchers use animals only when absolutely necessary. . ."

Vague language such as this does not indicate a real commitment to replacing, or even reducing, the total numbers of animals used in experiments. Virtually every institution funding animal experiments claims that it uses animals only when necessary. Yet countless examples have shown that animal experiments done in these same institutions are often of questionable scientific merit. For example, the March of Dimes funded an experiment which involved euthanizing and comparing the brains of normal cats, kittens, cats who had one eye sewn shut for at least a year, and cats who were reared in complete darkness. This experiment had no real relevance to the improvement of human health in a clinical setting, yet March of Dimes spokespersons continue to claim its researchers use animals only when "necessary."

ALTERNATIVES TO ANIMAL EXPERIMENTATION

While some charities put their funds into questionable animal experiments, others put all their resources into effective, non-animal research and direct services for people with ailments. Charities that do not fund animal experiments address such diverse concerns as birth defects, kidney disease, cancer, AIDS, and disabilities.

In the field of birth defects prevention, for example, a team of innovative researchers recently found that maternal magnesium therapy could potentially prevent cerebral palsy and mental retardation in 63 percent and 49 percent of cases respectively. This stunning advance came solely from human population studies. It was also clinical studies that led to the discovery of the link between folic acid deficiency and neural tube defects. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that folic acid supplementation could reduce neural tube defect incidence in the

U.S. by up to 70 percent, effecting the lives of thousands of babies.¹³

Direct services for people with ailments and public education to prevent disability and disease are additional ways health charities benefit the public without harming animals. The American Kidney Fund supports local patient rehabilitation programs and public education programs on preventing kidney disease. Each year the National Easter Seal Society provides direct services to over one million people with disabilities and helps thousands of therapists, physicians, and other health professionals improve services for people with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Those concerned about the treatment of animals and who want research to be relevant to human health are unlikely to find the words of charities that fund animal experiments comforting. A wide range of charities fund exclusively non-animal research, effective prevention programs, and/or direct services to patients. Many of us feel more comfortable supporting these charities instead of those that continue to fund troubling animal experiments.

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- ⁹Detailed information and further primary source references on the problems with extrapolating rat experiments to humans are available in the PCRM factsheet, "Rats: Test Results That Don't Apply to Humans."
- ¹⁰Jan Polon Novic (Letterman Army Institute of Research committee), Kim Sturla (Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley committee), Anne Phillips (Univ. of Tenn., Coll. of Veterinary Medicine committee), Thomas Poulton, M.D. (Creighton Univ. School of Medicine committee), Pamela Krausz (Univ. of Penn. committee), Steve Sapontzis, Ph.D. (Lawrence Berkeley Lab committee), Bruce Max Feldman, D.V.M. (Codon Co. committee).
- ¹¹Detailed information and further primary source references on IACUCs are available in the PCRM factsheet, "Animal Care and Use Committees: Structural Problems Impair Usefulness."
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