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Protesters Fail to Slow Animal Research

But scientists, fearing for safety, keep mum; new protests set next week

By RICHARD MONASTERSKY

The e-mail reply was polite but firm. "No. I will not be available for an interview," wrote a researcher from the University of California at Los Angeles, when asked about the effects of recent animal-rights protests there.

That scientist was downright chatty compared with most of the other investigators around the country contacted by *The Chronicle*. Most simply refused to answer phone calls or e-mail messages, while a few recruited university public-relations officials to explain why scientists were clamming up.

In the past few months, animal-rights groups have stepped up their demonstrations against academic researchers who use animals, spawning a new wave of concern among scientists. In February, extremists caused a fire at the home of a researcher from the University of California at Los Angeles, and protesters struck the husband of a scientist from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Scientific leaders fear the attacks are having a chilling effect on American biomedical research and are driving scientists out of the field. Yet *The Chronicle's* own analysis of federal grants and numerous interviews with scientists suggest that researchers are not abandoning animal experimentation. Even researchers who have been the targets of attacks and protests have generally continued with their work.

The recent activism has, however, cowed many scientists into silence. With few researchers willing to explain the importance of their work, public support for the use of animals in research will dry up, warn science advocates.

"We're responding with silence, and we've lost the war for public opinion," says Jacquie Calnan, president of Americans for Medical Progress, a nonprofit organization that supports the use of animals in research.

Her organization, however, is trying to fight back by importing an activist from the University of Oxford who helped set up pro-research groups at universities in Britain, which has had a longer and more violent history of animal-rights activism.

And some investigators are bucking the trend by speaking out and opening up their labs, trying to counter the message that animal-rights groups are sending.

There Will Be Protests

Many scientists in the United States are girding themselves for next week, when activists have planned protests and news conferences as part of World Laboratory Animal Liberation Week. Michael A. Budkie, executive director of Stop Animal Exploitation Now, says activists will stage events in more than 50 locations, most of them at universities.

The April protests, which have occurred annually for more than two decades, have largely been peaceful. But now researchers worry about violence, especially in the wake of the recent attacks in California.

"The attacks are more frequent and they're much more violent, and they include not only the researcher's laboratory but also the personage of the researcher, his family, and his home," says Jeffrey H. Kordower, a professor of neurological sciences at Rush University Medical Center and chairman of the Committee on Animals in Research at the Society for Neuroscience.

The prevailing wisdom among some scientists and university administrators is that the altered tactics are driving investigators away from animal research. They point to a few highly publicized departures. In 2006, Dario L. Ringach, an associate professor of behavioral neuroscience at the University of California at Los Angeles medical school announced he was curtailing his research using primates, after extremists from the Animal Liberation Front left an incendiary device near the home of another UCLA researcher. Protesters had previously threatened Mr. Ringach and his family.

In 2002, Michael Podell, a professor and veterinary researcher at Ohio State University, announced he was leaving the university after receiving death threats.

Beyond its effects on senior scientists, the intimidation has also scared away students, says Lindy F. Greene, an animal-rights protester in Los Angeles who was arrested last month outside the home of a UCLA researcher. "The combined effect is that graduate students don't want to get into animal research," she says.

A number of researchers fear that Ms. Greene is right. "I've talked to graduate students who tell me that's not the kind of business they want to go into," says P. Michael Conn, associate director of the Oregon National Primate Research Center, who has faced protests and vandalism.

At least one scientist has decided he needs to publicly warn students about the dangers involved in working with animals. Robert G. Dennis, an associate professor of biomedical engineering at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, put this message on his Web page for potential graduate students and postdocs: "You should be

aware that due to the highly controversial nature of this research, which involves animal-machine hybrids and, of course, stem cells, you will be constantly at risk from extremist groups and individuals. I have personally received many threatening messages."

But anecdotes aside, an analysis of research grants by *The Chronicle* reveals a surprising trend: People do not seem to be leaving the field. *The Chronicle* obtained records from the National Institutes of Health, through a Freedom of Information Act request, for the numbers of research grants involving animals over the past 20 years. Compared with the total numbers of applications and awards, the percentage that involves the use of animals has kept relatively constant, hovering around 42 percent since 1990.

According to Mr. Dennis, even with warnings like the one he posted on his Web site, he has not had trouble finding students. "I do not think animal activists have really done much to reduce the numbers," he said in an e-mail message. Although some graduate students and postdocs have discussed concerns with him, "these concerns seem to have died down a bit in recent years."

Alessandra Angelucci, an associate professor of ophthalmology at the University of Utah who conducts visual experiments using primates, has been the target of animal-rights protests for three years. But that has not scared away students, she says. "I haven't had this issue that graduate students won't go into research because of animal-rights people," she says.

Ducking for Cover

It will take some time to discern whether the most recent, more violent attacks depress the numbers of people going into research. The protests, however, have clearly succeeded in forcing many researchers to keep quiet. "People are not willing to put their heads up above the parapet for fear that they'll get blown off," says Frankie L. Trull, president of the Foundation for Biomedical Research, which supports the use of animals in medicine and science.

The silent scientists might be taking a lesson from the case of Edythe D. London, a professor of psychiatry at UCLA. Ms. London did not draw the attention of animal-rights protesters until an article about her work appeared last year in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Since then, vandals flooded her house in October and used an incendiary device to set fire to her door in February. Ms. London has stopped granting interviews, according to UCLA.

Yet not everyone has kept quiet. Richard W. Bianco, an associate professor of surgery at the University of Minnesota Medical School, decided that the best way to battle extremists was to open up his laboratory. Mr. Bianco says he and his family have received death threats in the past, and vandals destroyed university lab equipment and data in 1999. He responded by getting a grant to bring high-school students into his laboratory to learn about his work and see how animals are treated there. In the past two

years, he says, 2,000 students have toured his lab. "That's my way of counteracting this terrible anti-science movement," he says.

Ms. Calnan, of Americans for Medical Progress, argues that science needs more people like Mr. Bianco instead of researchers who succumb to "the ostrich syndrome." She adds: "The era of the silent scientist has to be over. We've got to be part of the dialogue that's going on about animal research."

Toward that end, Ms. Calnan's organization has provided a grant to bring Tom Holder to the United States. Mr. Holder, who graduated from the University of Oxford last year, helped run an organization in Britain called Pro-Test, which staged demonstrations and debates supporting of the use of animals in research.

In his first month in the United States, Mr. Holder has started a campus-oriented effort called Speaking of Research and is planning a tour within the next few weeks of several West Coast universities that have been the site of animal-rights protests. He intends to recruit students to demonstrate and voice support for medical research that uses animals.

"By working with students, you can also get scientists to stand up with them," he says. The two-year-old pro-research movement in Britain has had a measurable effect in changing student attitudes there, Mr. Holder argues: "We found that the animal-rights groups were having problems gathering new recruits." he says. "They end up losing a generation."

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