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ETHIC ASPECTS OF ANIMALS USAGE IN MEDICAL RESEARCHES

An estimated 26 million animals are used for research, testing, and education in the United States each year. More than 70,000 of them are nonhuman primates. New initiatives in the United States and abroad are seeking to replace animals with alternative models for ethical and scientific reasons. The Hastings Center has organized this educational resource to help those involved and interested in biomedical research with animals better understand this changing landscape.

This ideology rests on two assumptions. One of them is that science is “value free” in general and “ethics free” in particular—that science, which concerns only what is observable or empirically testable, has no place for ethical judgments. The second is that scientists must be agnostic about consciousness (and pain) in animals. This assumption explains how it was possible that a literature search I performed in 1982 with the Library of Congress on “analgesia for laboratory animals” unearthed only two references, one of which merely affirmed that there ought to be papers on the subject.

Scientists, like any other subgroup of society, must operate within the boundaries of the consensus social ethic at a given historical moment or else risk loss of autonomy at the hands of restrictive social regulation or legislation. Our laws for research animals passed, despite very vigorous opposition from the research community, because they accorded well with burgeoning societal concern about the welfare of animals used for social benefit. In essence, the research community had failed to meet societal expectations for the proper treatment of research animals. A commitment to such treatment, particularly control of pain, should have been part of researchers’ professional ethics.

In sum, and in spite of the laws, the animal research community has been remiss in failing to address all three levels of ethical concern emerging from animal research. It is unlikely that society will force researchers to address the first level—namely, whether there is any moral justification for using animals in research. Restricting invasive animal use to what is patently beneficial will probably evolve in time, but very slowly, since such an evolution will depend in part on the creation of nonanimal alternatives. But the third level of ethical concern—providing animals with the best possible living conditions compatible with their natures and eliminating negative conditions—is currently practicable. Attention not only to physical needs and control of physical pain, but also to accommodating animal telos in a manner that eliminates all forms of “negative mattering” for the animals and provides occasions for “positive mattering”—what we may call “animal happiness”—can go a long way toward making animal research a moral science. Inevitably, a research environment that makes the life of an animal used in research a pleasant one can do a great deal to counterbalance the issues that arise from invasive animal use.