

Animal experiments – a vicious circle?

There is little need to inform anyone nowadays about the many ways we exploit animals in today's society – we cruelly farm hens in tiny cages so we can take their eggs, we break a strong maternal bond when we remove day-old calves from their mothers so that we may steal their milk, and we brutally slaughter them so that we can consume their flesh. We imprison other animals in cages at zoos so we can marvel at their uniqueness, we coerce them into doing silly tricks to amuse us in circuses; and we hunt them, shoot them and fish them purely for our entertainment.

Humans have exploited animals throughout the ages, yet never before have we used them in such vast numbers nor exposed them to such confinement and cruel practices than we do today. It seems ironic that on the one hand we marvel at the beauty of nature and yet we have such brutal disrespect for the fellow creatures that serve to provide for us.

There are now many animal welfare groups that advocate the rights and promote the wellbeing of animals, and there are an increasing number of academics that are raising the status of animals by highlighting the qualities we share – cognitive abilities, social structures and, most importantly, sentience – and the complex relationships between us and them. All of this is turning our attention to the unimaginable suffering endured by factory farmed animals, but there is yet another form of animal exploitation that gets little attention, and one that is harder to oppose on ethical grounds.

Every year, hundreds of millions of animals are used around the world in experiments. They are injected with diseases, driven insane, electric shocked, blinded, concussed, burned, frozen, drowned, mechanically raped and dismembered – in the name of human health and well-being.

It's not an issue that many people like to think about let alone address. We can argue that it's cruel, that it's unethical and that we should respect animals and afford them rights, but when we are involved in debate with researchers, or with parents of children born with genetic defects or who have terminal cancer, every ethical argument is cast aside. Children are considered more important and we are dismissed as caring more for animals than we do for people. Animal experiments are thus considered a 'necessary evil' and are kept hidden behind closed doors - and animals continue to suffer in silence.

The Australian Association for Humane Research (AAHR) Inc. is a non profit organisation that challenges the use of animals in research and teaching and promotes the use of more humane and scientifically-valid non-animal alternatives. We maintain that animal experiments are NOT a 'necessary evil', and we should, instead, be looking at more logical and humane approaches to bettering our health.

A snapshot of human health:

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 130,714 deaths registered in 2005.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare released a report "Australia's Health 2008." In it, they list the following major chronic diseases:

Leading underlying causes of death, all ages, specific causes, 2005.

Cause of death	No. of Male deaths	%	No. of female deaths	%
Coronary heart disease	12,433	18.5	11,137	17.5
Cerebrovascular diseases	4,668	6.9	6,845	10.8
Lung cancer	4,694	7.0	2,705	4.3
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	2,832	4.2	2,054	3.2

Other heart diseases	3,249	4.8	4,378	6.9
Colorectal cancer	2,330	3.5	1,841	2.9
Diabetes	1,775	2.6	1,754	2.8
Chronic kidney disease	883	1.3	1,003	1.6

Source: AIHW National Mortality database.

After considering the associated risk factors of these diseases, an earlier report of theirs concludes that:

- More than 85% of adults are not consuming enough vegetables
- One in two adults are not getting sufficient physical activity
- Almost 50% of adults are not consuming enough fruit
- Around 21% of adults smoke tobacco.¹

The later report also mentions that:

- About 7.4 million adults were overweight in 2004–05, with over a third of those being obese.
- Diabetes is becoming more common—prevalence at least doubling in the past two decades.
- Cardiovascular diseases, cancers and respiratory diseases remain the leading causes of death overall
- Almost three-quarters of deaths among people under 75 years are considered to be largely avoidable.²

Various sources including the US-based Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine also point to the consumption of animal products as a major contributing factor to the onset of heart disease, various forms of cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis.

Environmental factors.

Even when we consider the habits of our species as a whole, our actions – and in particular, our further abuse toward animals – our health has again been compromised.

The emergence of new diseases and resurgence of old ones such as tuberculosis and cholera has been reflected by changes in human-induced global changes, including widespread forest clearance and climate change.³

An estimated 61% of the 1,415 species of infectious organisms known to be pathogenic in humans are transmitted by animals.⁴ Yet we continue to intensify production of meat and meat products, resulting in such diseases as mad cow disease and foot and mouth, and of course now – swine flu!

Human encroachment onto previously uncultivated environments increases further contact between humans, wildlife and livestock which again increases the risk of cross-species infection. An example is the establishment of piggeries close to the tropical forest in Northern Malaysia where the Nipah virus was first transmitted from flying foxes to pigs and then to humans in 1998. Then further destruction of the natural forest encouraged the flying foxes to relocate closer to humans.⁵

It's ironic that our ongoing abuse of animals – primarily for their milk and for their flesh - is a major contributing factor to our declining health, yet instead of reducing or eliminating our consumption of animal products we exploit even more animals in experiments in a futile attempt to fix the problem.

¹ Chronic Diseases and Associated Risk Factors in Australia, 2006. Australian Institute of Health & Welfare.

² Australia's Health 2008. Australian Institute of Health & Welfare.

³ Social and environmental risk factors in the emergence of infectious diseases, Robin a Weiss & Anthony J McMichael, *Nature Magazine*, Volume 10, Number 12, December 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Financial burden on our health care system.

Cardiovascular disease takes up \$1.47 billion of our health care resources, with the major component being hospital care.⁶ The associated risk factors include tobacco smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, physical inactivity, excess weight, poor diet and excessive alcohol use. Similarly, cerebrovascular disease (stroke) has the same associated risk factors and uses up \$894 million of our health care resources. In fact, almost every category of chronic disease in Australia, including diabetes, osteoporosis, colorectal cancer and even depression has the same or similar associated risk factors.

Added to these healthcare costs is the publicly funded \$338.2 million in grant money (much of which is used to fund animal experiments) awarded to researchers by the NHMRC in 2008⁷ in an attempt to cure these ailments.

So why, if we can greatly reduce the incidence of these diseases through lifestyle modification, do we subject millions of animals to often painful experiments in an attempt to cure our problems?

We have other ways of addressing these issues:

Prevention – education about smoking, healthy eating, exercise, safe sex.

Rehabilitation – for users of drugs and alcohol - which would subsequently decrease the rate of depression and suicide.

Better sanitation / living conditions - In industrialising countries during the nineteenth century, a major reduction in enteric infections was achieved by separating drinking water from sewage – considered to have saved more lives than all the twentieth century vaccines and antibiotics together.⁸

Improved traffic conditions - driving skills, road conditions, signage and policing of speeding and drug and alcohol users would help reduce the road toll. On average, four to five people are killed every day in crashes on Australian roads. A great many more are seriously injured and permanently incapacitated. In addition to the burden of personal suffering, the monetary cost of road crashes is an estimated \$15 billion annually (1996 data).⁹

Higher investment into these strategies collectively has the potential for saving many more lives than medical research could ever achieve.

If our government is truly concerned about achieving a healthy society then our taxes would clearly be better utilised on the above. A healthier society would also be far less of a burden on our hospital and health care systems.

Animal research however, is big business. It builds scientists careers, it feeds the pharmaceutical conglomerates, and it employs animal technicians, animal suppliers, cage suppliers etc.

Who are the losers? Certainly the animals used in the research, but so too are the public. We continue to fund the industry through our tax dollars, and to provide donations to health charities. But maybe

⁶ Chronic Diseases and Associated Risk Factors in Australia, 2006. Australian Institute of Health & Welfare.

⁷ Personal correspondence from NHMRC dated 29 Feb 2008.

⁸ Social and environmental risk factors in the emergence of infectious diseases, Robin a Weiss & Anthony J McMichael, *Nature Magazine*, Volume 10, Number 12, December 2004.

⁹ Australian Transport Safety Bureau (http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/2006/Road_safety_in_Aust.aspx)

the biggest losers are those people who really are sick – including those who continue with a destructive lifestyle clinging to the false promise that a miracle cure is just around the corner.

Animal experiments – life saving?

Animal experimentation is generally considered a “necessary evil.” While many dislike the notion that it happens, they accept that it is necessary to save human lives. However an extremely high volume of animal experiments conducted today cannot be considered “life-saving.”

Agricultural research, including genetic engineering and cloning, attempts to increase the quality and yields of flesh and milk from animals – despite their bodies already being pushed to their productive limits.

Cosmetic testing causes great suffering to millions of animals merely to serve our own vanity.

Toxicity testing is also conducted to determine safety levels of “new and improved” products – despite these being non-essential luxuries. Again, non-animal alternatives exist for many forms of toxicity testing that provide cheaper and more accurate results.¹⁰

And even when we consider those experiments that are directly related to human health, are they the most efficacious way to medical discoveries?

“There is *always* less than a fifty-fifty chance that a medication tested on animals will provide the same results in humans.... usually *much* less. This is not science. It is expensive and dangerous gambling.”
“Sacred Cows and Golden Geese” (p.48)C. Ray Greek and Jean Swingle Greek.

“The organization Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America estimates that only 5 in 5,000 compounds that enter preclinical testing make it to human testing, and only 1 of those 5 may be safe and effective enough to reach pharmacy shelves.”
<http://www.fda.gov/fdac/special/testtubetopatient/studies.html>

The need for non-animal methods:

AAHR is certainly not opposed to medical research. We acknowledge that there are many illnesses that stem from a genetic defect or by accident, and that not all are attributable to our lifestyle choices. We do consider it essential however, that we turn our focus away from animal experiments and toward studying our own species – through epidemiological studies, clinical studies and autopsies. Extrapolation of data from one species to another can be (and indeed has been) dangerously misleading. The drug Vioxx is a good example to illustrate species differences. Vioxx has caused thousands of heart attacks in humans, however the lawyers who defended the manufacturers of Vioxx argued that it was completely safe in mice. In fact it was even cardio-protective in mice. We see the same example with seroxat which is an anti-depressant. Again, seroxat was considered safe after passing animal experiments but in humans, especially teenagers, it caused an increase in suicide.¹¹ And of course there was the tragic TGN1412 trial in the UK which attracted enormous media attention and caused alarm throughout the research industry.

It’s therefore essential that we focus specifically on human conditions rather than on artificially-induced replicas of a disease in a totally different species - species that differ from us anatomically, genetically and metabolically.

Conclusion:

¹⁰ “Beyond the Cage. Is animal experimentation necessary?” Dr Andrew Knight, Animal Consultants International.

¹¹ “Beyond the Cage. Is animal experimentation necessary?” Dr Andre Menache

This analysis leads us to question the allocation of our healthcare budget. Are we wasting precious resources – time and millions of dollars – and at the same time causing rather than eliminating illness and suffering? Certainly this is the case for the 7 million laboratory animals used each year, but so too, it seems, is the case for our unhealthy society.

It seems apparent that we need to get off this merry-go-round of exploiting animals through intensive farms, crude transportation, slaughter for food and degradation of their environment, and then exploiting even more animals in laboratories by subjecting them to painful experiments in an attempt to cure us of the ills that our own exploits have contributed to.

Together, and by adopting a more holistic approach, the use of non-animal methodologies and better health education will break the vicious cycle and guarantee far less suffering - for both humans and for animals.

Helen Marston, May 2009