

“Why Is Animal Research Still Necessary?”



Dr Ian Gibson MP

On the 18th May, Andrew Lansley MP, Patsy Calton MP and I hosted a Parliamentary reception in the Strangers Dining Room of the House of Commons for the recently established Coalition for Medical Progress (CMP). The Coalition is an alliance of organisations that share a common aim to ensure the UK continues to lead advances in human and animal medicine. The role of the CMP is to explain the case for medical progress and the benefits due to animal research. The reception included charitable, academic and commercial research organisations concerned with research on how the body works and how disorders can be overcome. These studies range from basic research on DNA at the cellular level up to large scale clinical trials in people.

Research on animals takes place in Britain when there is no alternative and after the Home Office has assessed costs and benefits. Laboratories, scientists and research programmes are all licensed before animal work is undertaken. Hence there are incentives to minimise suffering, for ethical, legal and scientific reasons and to use the minimum number of animals consistent with obtaining statistically significant results as they are far more expensive than methods that do not use animals.

Nevertheless, in spite of all these precautions, there are few issues that generate as much correspondence for MPs and Peers as animal welfare. Indeed, the British people have an almost unique aversion for animal suffering and this is probably why our country has such stringent controls on the use of animals in biomedical research. There is a good case for suggesting that if research on animals is here to stay, as an essential but

hopefully an ultimately reducible component of international research on living organisms, is it not better for the animals involved that the work be carried out in Britain where this is best managed? By displaying negative and emotive reactions which could drive the work offshore, where we may have far less influence and control, the outcome could lead to overall increases rather than reductions in animal suffering.

Partners in the Coalition present on the day were represented by stands clearly displaying the names of their host organisation and presenting keynote research with which they are associated. They were staffed by well qualified representatives who were able to debate and discuss openly and frankly the important role that research on animals has for the work they undertake to improve the health and welfare of both people and animals themselves. The list of organisations involved has a familiar ring, as we naturally associate some of their names with downstream benefits that research brings to society through the doctor's surgery and the drug dispensary, rather than the upstream research on which this is based.

To give a few concise examples and illustrate the broad scope of the work involved, we should emphasise the benefits to animals worldwide from the work of the Animal Health Trust on vaccines against highly infectious Horse Flu, a global problem that causes immense disruption to British Racing.

AstraZeneca, one of the top five pharmaceutical companies in the world, is offering a new treatment for advanced lung cancer for patients with otherwise limited options.

The Biotechnology and Biological

Sciences Research Council is working on Stem cell research for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, diabetes and cancer, and development of anti-inflammatory drugs for arthritis.

The British Heart Foundation is investigating recurrent narrowing of arteries following angioplasty and the use of snake venom in treating cardiovascular disease.

Cancer Research UK, sponsored almost entirely by public donations, is concerned with chemotherapy for childhood leukaemia and experimenting with drugs that stop the blood supply to tumours without which they cannot grow. They conduct research on the human p53 gene that monitors cell damage and if this is detected, issues “don't grow or die” instructions when functioning normally. Defective or missing p53 genes can result in damaged cells becoming cancerous.

GlaxoSmithKline invested over £2.8bn in research and development in 2003 with £1bn spent in the UK. They conduct research on respiratory diseases, especially Asthma, and have developed, with the help of human volunteers, an electronic lung for testing novel drugs through an inhaler.

Other British based world class organisations in this show included Huntingdon Life Sciences, Lilly, the Medical Research Council, the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control (NIBSC), Pfizer, and The Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute. Further information of the work of other members not represented on the day are readily available on the website www.medicalprogress.org. This provides a unique and valuable resource to help you to make up your own mind about the need for and benefits of animal research.