

# ASPA 1986: ALLOWING SCIENTISTS TO 'PLAY' WITH ANIMALS SINCE 1986



Ida Barlow

*Ida Barlow is one of University College London's amazing "Bright Club". These are working scientists who perform on stage from time to time, describing their work in an amusing (sometimes hilarious) manner. This is a brief abstract from a recent gig.*

Have you ever suffered from insomnia? Most of us have experienced The Curse of the 'Ticking Brain', when our thoughts just refuse to shut-up and allow us a bit of shut-eye. We NEED sleep, and yet sometimes our bodies just refuse to let us have it. What's more baffling is that we don't even really know why we need sleep, or, for that matter why we need to spend 1/3 of our lives doing it!

Trying to solve these questions is what's keeping me up at night. I have just embarked on a PhD researching the genes and neural networks that regulate sleep. In zebrafish. This is useful and relevant to you, I promise, and the reason I'm studying sleep in zebrafish is simply because I can manipulate their genetics and watch them sleep. Pretty sure I would be locked up if I tried to do this on humans.

From the start of my PhD, I was eager to get my hands on a project that I could control. However, my dreams and aspirations of becoming a Superstar Scientist with annual publications in Nature and Science was somewhat stalled when my supervisor informed me that I cannot touch a little fishy until I had obtained my Personal Licence for performing research on animals.

The Home Office is very successful at tearing us researchers away from Laboratory benches to ensure that we know how to look after our little creatures correctly. Anyone in the UK carrying out research on protected animals

(which means any living vertebrate, other than man) must complete several days of (what may be considered rather dull) training. Two precious days that could be spent collecting valuable data are instead spent in a training room in Bromley. I had always wanted to visit Bromley, and now here I was.

Ideally, the Animal Scientific Procedures Act 1986 (ASPA 1986) is read before attending the course, which is not too much to ask of conscientious and avid readers of academic literature. Wrong. Scientists are not accustomed to reading tediously long and repetitive documents detailing what may be assumed to be common sense. We are neither lawyers nor politicians. We prefer a peer-reviewed original research article with solid experimental evidence, demonstrating unambiguous support of an hypothesis.

Optimistically, the course commences with Schedule 1, which covers how to kill our lovely creatures. Severing all ties between the head, heart, and body is the general gist of it. This does mean learning the best procedure to anaesthetise or concuss your Animal of Choice, and then also ensuring that it is properly dead (definition: the heart no longer beats and the brain no longer works) before carrying out any procedure. Rather ironically, being taught how to kill animals humanely takes precedence over how to care and look after their well-being whilst alive!

We quickly veer away from any practical skills to learning about the bureaucracy of ASPA

1986 and how this applies to Research Institutions. Not one, not two, but three licences are required before any animal can even be considered for use in an experiment. In addition, every single procedure that may be carried out on any animal must be shown to have a qualified purpose (for the sake of Science, of course!), and a Risk Assessment of any physiological or psychological harm that may be caused to any animal must be carried out. Sounds an awful lot like bog-standard Health and Safety regulations, to be honest.

We leave the course with the mantra of the three R's: Replacement, Refinement and Reduction. In practical terms this does mean that we should all strive to minimise the use of animals; techniques that cause pain or suffering should be refined (we want the most reliable results too!); and the number of animals required should be reduced. This is no menial task when trying to retain the high academic standards that our research institutions set.

An Accredited Multiple Choice Test was the last hurdle in obtaining my Personal Licence, and the final reward a certificate confirming that I am a Certified Fish Husband.

For eager young PhD students like me, the Personal Licence training days are the closest thing to corporate hospitality that I may glimpse: Two whole days on an off-site training course, with a free lunch, and a chance at networking with other like-minded researchers around the country!