

REPORTS AND COMMENTS

The use of non-human primates in research and testing

In view of the particular controversy associated with the use of primates in research and testing, the subject was chosen recently for review by the Boyd Group (a UK forum for dialogue on contentious issues in laboratory animal use). The Group addressed the moral status of the non-human primates commonly used in the UK and considered various specific questions. Are primates a special case? Should the UK's ban on use of great apes be extended to other species? Should the use of primates require special justification (as presently required in the UK) and what reasons might be sufficiently strong to justify their use? And, what practical steps can be taken to safeguard the welfare of those currently used?

The report comprises a collection of five papers and these are preceded by a summary of the discussions and conclusions. The five papers cover: background information on the use of non-human primates; empirical evidence on their moral status; the question 'are apes persons?'; welfare considerations in the use of macaques and marmosets; and use of primates in regulatory toxicology.

The Boyd Group considered that there was strong and clear evidence that great apes have complex mental abilities similar in some important ways to those of humans and which strongly suggest that the animals have:

- a sense of self and insight into their own thoughts and feelings;
- a developed sense of time and purpose, so that they can think about the future and reflect on the past;
- an ability to empathise with the thoughts and feelings of other members of their own species; and perhaps,
- the capacity to communicate their thoughts and feelings via symbolic, syntactic language.

The Group concluded that these mental abilities are likely to enhance the capacity of these animals for suffering to such an extent that it is unethical to confine them to laboratories for research or testing. They also concluded, regarding other primates, that there is strong, although not incontestable, evidence that because of "the general richness of monkeys' social lives and mental abilities", their use in research and testing has the potential to cause greater social and mental suffering than in other laboratory species. In view of this, the Boyd Group upheld the current UK legal requirement that their use should require special justification. However, the report does not offer guidance as to what might constitute this special justification, and it is noted that there is considerable room for debate about the nature of the special protection that primates should receive under UK law.

Other recommendations include: that appropriate expertise should be involved in the ethical review of proposals for primate use; that the Home Office — the government body responsible for granting licenses for scientific procedures on primates — should provide more information on how it makes its judgments; and that steps should be taken to improve welfare in the breeding and supply of macaques used in research. Regarding the latter, it is recommended that there should be a long-term strategy to build up captive breeding populations of macaques in source countries so that wild-caught animals need not be used. This report addresses some very important questions about if and where lines should be drawn between species regarding the justifiability of their use for research. Are there some species that should never be used in (harmful) research? And, are there some that, because of particular aspects of their biology, may have a greater potential for suffering than others and thus deserve a higher level of protection than others? These are difficult questions, partly because knowledge relevant to these questions is far from complete, and partly because science can only help to a degree with such issues

anyway. They are, at least with the present state of knowledge, matters of judgement rather than fact. The report provides a useful summary of the present state of primate use for research and testing in the UK and an introduction to the issues underlying the ethical debate about this.

The Boyd Group Papers on the use of Non-Human Primates in Research and Testing. June 2002. Edited by Jane A Smith and Kenneth M Boyd. Published by The British Psychological Society Scientific Affairs Board Standing Advisory Committee on The Welfare of Animals in Psychology. Available from The Boyd Group, P O Box 423, Southsea PO5 1TJ, UK, and at the Boyd Group website: www.boyd-group.demon.co.uk. 59 pp A4 paperback (ISBN 1 85433 371 2). Free of charge within UK, £3 overseas postal charge.

House of Lords report on the use of animals in scientific procedures

After more than a year of gathering oral and written evidence from over 100 organisations and over 350 individuals, the House of Lords Select Committee has now published its report on the use of animals in scientific procedures. Given the breadth of the subject, the Committee is to be commended for producing a report that is only 82 pages long. For those interested in the background evidence, two supplementary volumes listing all the oral and written evidence are also available.

The report begins with a statement that lays out the Select Committee's view on the ethics of using animals in science. The committee considers that it is morally acceptable for humans to use other animals but that it is morally wrong to cause them unnecessary or avoidable suffering. The Committee believes also that there is a continued need for animal experiments both in applied research and in research aimed purely at extending knowledge. In effect, the Committee agrees with the *status quo* regarding policy with respect to using animals in experiments. The report does, however, provide a number of important recommendations for change in the operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Two major ones are that the Home Office should examine ways of reducing the bureaucracy of the project license system and speeding up routine or minor amendments, and that there should be greater openness about the projects licensed — subject to specific requirements for confidentiality, for example about the identities of the researchers involved or commercial information.

There are a number of important recommendations aimed at improving animal welfare. Probably the most significant of these is the proposal to establish a Centre for the 3Rs. This Centre, which would be funded by the government, industry and animal welfare charities, would coordinate research on the 3Rs and disseminate information. The suggestion is likely to be politically attractive, but will need to be carefully examined to ensure that any new organisation lacking a proven track record does not impair the activities of organisations currently working to advance the 3Rs. Moreover, it seems uncertain that animal welfare charities will wish (or be able) to devolve responsibility for dispersing their funds to another organisation. Another important suggestion is that the Government and the scientific community should engage in a systematic search for reduction, refinement and replacement techniques in toxicology. As toxicology represents 17% of animal use and is an area in which it is notably difficult to introduce change, this is a valuable contribution; however, it remains to be seen how such a search could be organised.

It is recommended that the Animal Procedures Committee's (APC's) budget for the 3Rs should be transferred to the proposed new Centre, and that there should be greater separation of the APC from the Home Office regulators. This is at least partly to allow the APC to more actively monitor the work of the Inspectorate. This is presumably what the Committee had in mind when it recommended that the Inspectorate be subject to independent review.