Guest Editorial

Learning from Henry Spira

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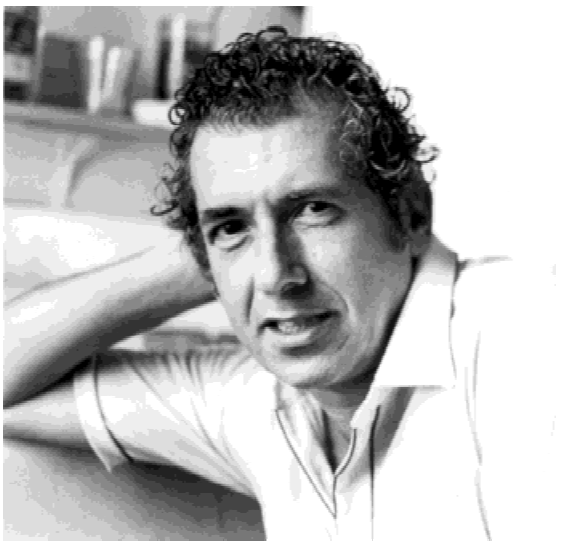

For a very long time, the scientific and animal welfare communities have faced each other across a seemingly unbridgeable divide. Each side tends to view the other in simplistic and distorted terms. Animal welfare advocates see scientists as, at worst, sadists who enjoy torturing animals, and at best, as self-interested careerists intent on building careers out of publishing more papers and getting more grants, irrespective of the cost to animals. Scientists committed to research see the animal movement as consisting of, at best, ignorant, simple-minded people awash in emotion and sensationalism, and at worst, violent and dangerous fanatics who claim to care for animals but are indifferent to human suffering.

This situation does neither side any good. For the foreseeable future, animal experiments will not be stopped or reduced as long as scientists—who still command considerable respect with the community and the government—generally regard their opponents as not worth taking seriously. And as long as scientists are perceived as implacably hostile to any ethically based criticism of their use of animals, extremists in the animal movement will continue to do

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their best to disrupt animal experimentation. Even if such attempts are largely unsuccessful, they will necessitate expensive security measures and deter some prospective scientists from going into fields that involve experiments on animals.

Although it is the hard-liners on both sides who get the most media attention, there have been calmer, more respectful voices seeking common ground. We see common ground as a place to talk, to share information, and to achieve compromises. It is a frame of mind that allows process to take place.

We realize that scientists and animal welfare advocates have different agendas. The ultimate goal of science is to pursue knowledge. The ultimate goal of the animal movement is to minimize the pain and suffering that we inflict on animals (and in the view of some, but not all of the movement, to stop humans killing animals except in very limited circumstances). If scientists do come around to the view that alternatives to experimenting on animals are possible, they will only do so if they can reach their goal by these alternative means. But even groups with very different goals can still share common ground.

This special section of the *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* has been produced in honor of Henry Spira, who, of all among those calmer voices promoting common ground, was the most successful in really making a difference in the way that science has been conducted. Who, you are probably asking, was Henry Spira?

Spira was born in Belgium in 1927. By the time he was 12 years old his family had moved to Panama. There he had a life-altering experience. His father's small clothing store had fallen on hard times, and the family moved into rooms in a huge mansion owned by a wealthy family friend. One day two men who worked for the friend asked Henry if he wanted to come with them on their daily round collecting rents. He was taken into the slums, where he saw his companions, armed with guns, extracting rents from poor people living in deplorable slums. That, he realized, was how his family's benefactor could afford to live in luxury.

From then on Henry was always to be found on the side of the weak, not the powerful; of the oppressed, not the oppressor; of the ridden, not the rider. This resolve has had a dizzying number of manifestations. After his family moved to the United States in 1940, he became an American citizen. As a merchant seaman he was blacklisted during the McCarthy era. Then he became a central figure in the reform movement that challenged corrupt union bosses. In 1956 Henry went to the American South to support blacks in their struggle for civil rights. When Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, Henry went there to see the process of land reform. Later, he taught disadvantaged children in New York City's public schools. In 1973 he came across an essay entitled "Animal Liberation"[1] and realized that there was another group of exploited beings who needed his help. Over the next 25 years, he became the most effective activist in the American animal rights movement. Henry's experience in human rights had taught him a valuable lesson: change is best achieved incrementally. Such a strategy seemed like heresy to many in the movement. They wanted the total and immediate abolition of animal experimentation, and would demand nothing less.

Henry's ultimate goal was no less far-reaching than that of the abolitionists, but his immediate concern was to do something that would benefit animals. The abolitionists, he saw, had been demanding abolition for a century or more, but during that period the number of experiments carried out had grown from

a few hundred per year to tens of millions. Spira's focus on achieving results has given him an unusual attitude to the people that most animal rights advocates regard as "the enemy":

> If people are going to develop alternatives, it's the people in the research community who will be developing alternatives. If you're going to get the regulatory agencies to change their requirements, it's going to be animal researchers who are the ones who are going to do it, it's not going to be us who are going to do it. I mean, these are the folks that you need if you're going to be serious about change . . . you're not going to reprogram them by saying we're saints and you're sinners and we're going to clobber you with a two-by-four in order to educate you.[2]

In this spirit, at the beginning of the 1980s Spira conducted a campaign against animal testing in the cosmetics industry that led to Revlon, Avon, and other major cosmetics corporations putting money into the search for alternatives to animal testing. This has made it possible for so many cosmetic products today to bear the label "not tested on animals." Later Spira sought to ensure that animals are replaced in other areas of testing, and also moved on to issues concerning farm animals and to promoting environmentally sustainable ways of ensuring a healthy diet for everyone on our planet.

The goal of this special section is, in the spirit of Henry Spira's work, to foster a dialogue built upon mutual understanding and a pragmatic concern for mutual interests, between scientists and animal welfare advocates. In the series of papers that comprise this special section, we honor Henry in the way that would mean most to him: by furthering the cause closest to his heart.

Henry Spira died on September 13, 1998.

Notes

1. Singer P. Animal liberation. *New York Review of Books*, 5 April 1973.
2. Spira H. in *Henry: One Man's Way*, a video produced by Peter Singer and John Swindells. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 1997.