Plus Ça Change:  
Anti-Vivisection Then and Now

Harriet Ritvo

The word “vivisection” has an old-fashioned ring, and “anti-vivisectionist” is even more suggestive of quixotic Victorian crusades. Yet speakers at a recent conference on “Standards for Research with Animals: Current Issues and Proposed Legislation” invoked both terms frequently. As its title suggests, the focus of the conference was hardly antiquarian, and the unusually large audience it attracted testified to the timeliness of the topic. Several hundred researchers and administrators from major universities and hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and government agencies, as well as a sprinkling of humane society members, came to hear two days of panels and discussions. There was a flurry of last-minute registrations, and the organizers had to schedule extra sessions of the most popular workshops.

The sponsor of the gathering, PRIM&R [Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research], a non-profit organization based in Boston, regularly mounts conferences about ethical issues in biomedical research. Founded in 1974 by a group of scientists and lawyers, PRIM&R considers itself an advocacy group for “appropriate and ethical research that will both improve the quality of life and benefit society” at a time when “public sentiment towards research has grown increasingly hostile.”

The topic of the October conference was chosen because it seemed very timely in this context of concern, but even so, the organizers were surprised at the relative intensity of interest in the fate of experimental animals.

The prospectus announced that the conference would “explore the present conduct of research with animals in this country with emphasis on the ethical, scientific, medical and administrative aspects of such research.” The actual agenda discussed by most of the speakers, however, was considerably more focused. They were primarily concerned [as was their audience, on the evidence of question periods and hallway conversations] with the threat of increased lay interference in the design and execution of scientific research. Although the tone of their discourse was overwhelmingly temperate and respectful, most of the scientific speakers assumed that humane criticism was rooted in either ignorance [lack of scientific understanding] or false priorities [sentimental preference for animals over humans]. They also assumed that the current movement to regulate the experimental use of animals was new, even faddish, a product of the expanded liberal sensibilities of the 1960s and 1970s. Several speakers claimed that the publication of Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals in 1975 had provoked a sudden rise in consciousness and activism.

Both these assumptions tend to underestimate the seriousness of the animal protection movement, the strength of the response it evokes among the lay public, and the depth of its historical roots. That is not to suggest that current resistance to scientific experimentation on animals is a linear descendent of the 19th-century agitation that prompted the first British legislation about the scientific use of animals. Yet it is revealing that several contemporary organizations preserve the term “anti-vivisection” in their names, despite

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its overtones of crankiness and lost causes. And the terms of the current debate echo those used a century ago with sometimes startling precision, although the science involved has changed beyond recognition and most animal advocates now base their convictions in philosophy rather than religion.

The most self-conscious animal advocates recognize this historical analogy. If scientists shared this awareness, they might gain a more accurate and a more worrisome understanding of the confrontation in which they find themselves engaged.

The beginnings of the animal protection movement in England [which led America in this respect well into 19th century] can be traced to the last part of the 18th century. Scattered testimonials to earlier humane concern for the welfare of beasts exist, but until the Romantic period, when English sympathies widened to include primitive peoples, the poor, women, and other previously disregarded groups, such concern was apt to be regarded as eccentric, even self-indulgent. As late as the 1780s, it was rumored that Humphrey Morice, a member of the Privy Council, had provided for his thirty aged horses and dogs not in the main body of his will, but in a secret codicil included in a letter to a friend, presumably because he feared posthumous ridicule. Morice was probably unnecessarily apprehensive, however; by 1780, thinkers as diverse as Evangelical clergymen and Jeremy Bentham were advocating the right of animals to humane treatment.

The first attempts to create a legal basis for enforcing this new sensibility quickly followed. A bill to abolish bull-baiting was narrowly defeated in Parliament in 1800, and a broader bill to prevent malicious or wanton cruelty met a similar fate in 1809. Finally, in 1822, a bill “to prevent cruel and improper treatment of Cattle” became law. Its provisions were comparatively narrow and feeble, and applied only to horses, sheep, asses, cows, and steers. Bulls were excluded, along with dogs, cats, pigs, goats, birds, and wild animals. Nevertheless, the act established the authority of government to regulate the treatment of privately owned animals.

Whether the government would exercise its new authority was another question, especially since there was not yet any regular constabulary. To ensure that the Act was enforced, its sponsor Richard Martin, with a diverse group of supporters including Evangelicals and utilitarians, politicians, and clergymen, founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1824. From the beginning, the Society employed a corps of inspectors, whose job was to apprehend and prosecute lawbreakers. It soon became the leader of respectable humane opinion. As early as 1835 it received the Royal patronage of the Duchess of Kent and the then-Princess Victoria, and in 1840 Queen Victoria allowed the Society to add the prefix “Royal” to its name.

The humane movement and the anti-vivisection movement were not identical [as they are not now], although their concerns overlapped. The RSPCA, for example, was more inclined to admit the claims of science than were organizations exclusively concerned with animal experimentation. Even its prospectus of 1824, before the issue had become highly charged, equivocated: “However justifiable it may be to conduct certain experiments of a painful nature, under the control of a benevolent mind, with the view to determine some important question in science, not otherwise attainable, yet all must agree that Providence cannot intend that the secrets of Nature should be discovered by means of cruelty.” Half a century later, when public concern about experimentation on live animals was at its height and Parliament was preparing to consider regulatory legislation, John Colam, then secretary of the RSPCA, offered similarly ambivalent testimony to the Royal Commission on the Practice of Subjecting Live Animals to Experiments for Scientific Purposes. He recommended that no painful experiments on live animals be permitted, but he recognized the value of scientific research and praised the humanitarian concern of the majority of British experimenters.

Although many individual RSPCA members were enthusiastic anti-vivisectionists, many other members of this large, wealthy, and pragmatic organization were eager to support experimental scientists in research that would improve the lives of animals as well as people. The Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876—which mandated government surveillance of animal experiments through annually renewed licenses granted to experimenters, but did not specifically prohibit any research activities—was a disappointment to the RSPCA. Nevertheless, the society soon returned to its pri-
mary concern with everyday cruelty; by 1881, a survey conducted by The Zoophilist, an anti-vivisection periodical, found that almost no local RSPCA chapters were actively anti-vivisectionist.\textsuperscript{13}

The Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876 assuaged the fears of genuine anti-vivisectionists hardly at all. They tended to be more idealistic than humane society members, more principled and systematic in their objections to animal experimentation, more radical in their criticism of the scientific enterprise. Henry Salt, the philosopher of the late Victorian anti-vivisection movement, viewed “the awful tortures of vivisection” as the logical outcome of both the lack of reverence for nature required by the analytic methods of science and the arrogance of scientists who, “however kindly and considerate in other respects, have never scrupled to subordinate the strongest promptings of humaneness to the least of the supposed interests of science.” Under these conditions, it was “inevitable that the physiologist should vivisect as that the country gentleman should shoot.”\textsuperscript{14}

Salt was unusually restrained in expressing his feelings. The rhetoric of George Richard Jesse, an eccentric dog lover whose tactics did not attract much support from fellow anti-vivisectionists, was more representative. He founded and headed his own pressure group, which he dubbed the Society for the Abolition of Vivisection or Putting Animals to Death by Torture under any Pretext Whatever (later changed to the Society for the Total Abolition and Utter Suppression of Vivisection); he referred to governmental and scientific attempts to combat rabies as “the brutal massacre of innumerable innocent, intelligent and affectionate animals.”\textsuperscript{15}

For many anti-vivisectionists, humanitarian revulsion from pain was intensified by religious scruples. They could not believe that a benevolent God would make pain the means of good. So they shared the anguish expressed by Anna Kingsford, a leading figure in the movement as well as both a doctor and a mystic: “For what becomes of the belief in a good and all-compassionate God, if men are to be taught that the way to knowledge and healing involves deeds which hitherto have been supposed to characterize only the worst and wickedest of cowards.”\textsuperscript{16}

If the Act of 1876 represented a legislative victory for scientists, it did not guarantee that the public would sympathize with their point of view. For several decades afterwards, vigorous and emotional anti-vivisection campaigns continued to arouse widespread sympathy. The English often seemed to prefer the claims of animals who were victims of experimental cruelty to those of humans who might be helped by the resulting scientific advances. This tendency was particularly marked if the interests of dogs were at stake. For this reason, the Victorian debate over rabies control stirred especially strong public support for the anti-vivisectionist position, even though hysterical fear of the disease itself was also common. Throughout the debate, scientific progress was only one of several competing values, and not the one that commanded the most heartfelt popular allegiance.

Although rabies had been known in England for centuries, only scattered individual cases had been reported until about 1735. At that time, the incidence of rabies seemed to increase noticeably, especially among dogs. Outbreaks occurred every decade or so, and because these were concentrated in London and in the industrial parts of Lancashire, increasing numbers of people and animals were at risk.\textsuperscript{17} In 1877, the worst year on record, 79 people died in England and Wales. Although such casualties were not particularly high in comparison with other hazards—common killers like tuberculosis, typhoid, and diphtheria took a much higher toll, and according to one informal calculation even murder was a fate ten times more likely to befall the Victorian Englishperson—they sparked public concern.\textsuperscript{18} Throughout the 19th century, Parliament regularly considered bills to prevent the spread of rabies and to compensate people bitten by rabid dogs. The disease was investigated by government committees in 1830, 1887 (twice), and 1897.\textsuperscript{19} Despite the almost total absence of reliable knowledge about rabies (or hydrophobia, as it was popularly known), a steady stream of books and articles carried disinformation to doctors, pet owners, veterinarians, and concerned citizens.

Although rabies in humans was associated with the bite of a rabid dog, not every such bite resulted in rabies, nor did every human victim remember being bitten by a dog. This lack of data might have reflected the fact that the incubation time for rabies is usually about six weeks, but can extend to over a year; it might have reflected the fact that although a bite is the most likely means
of introducing the rabies virus into the human bloodstream, it is not the only way. There was even more confusion about the genesis of the disease in dogs. During most of the 19th century, the prevalent opinion held that although any animal (including man) might become rabid after being bitten by a rabid animal (generally a dog), rabies could also be “spontaneously generated” in dogs that were exposed to a variety of unpleasant circumstances. Depending on which authority was consulted, these included overfeeding, sexual frustration, hot weather, cold weather, wet weather, thirst, hunger, confinement, terror, and pain. 

Because the theory of spontaneous generation meant that rabies could arise in any dog at any time, it undermined the plausibility of one effective official response to a rabies outbreak, which was to require that all dogs within the affected area be confined, leashed, or muzzled. Nevertheless, authorities continued to impose such measures, in part because nothing else was available and in part because experience showed that they worked. In fact, the more stringently they were enforced (meaning that the more non-compliant dogs were destroyed), the more effective they were. Except at the height of a local epizootic, however, dog owners resisted these strictures. They were troublesome to comply with, they interfered with the dogs’ freedom and pleasure, and the muzzles were painful. It was suggested by a physician who did not believe in microbes that the use of the muzzle actually “developed the rabid matter in the blood of dogs.”

When it came, the theoretical explanation of why muzzling and confinement worked was no more persuasive to many citizens than the practical demonstration of their efficacy. After experimenting on dogs for several years, Louis Pasteur inoculated the first human being with rabies vaccine in July 1885. News of this and subsequent successes aroused interest in London, and the next year the Local Government Board appointed a committee to visit his laboratory and scrutinize his results. One member of the committee was George Fleming, the most distinguished British veterinarian of his period and the author of *Rabies and Hydrophobia*. In that authoritative work, published over a decade earlier, Fleming had rather reluctantly admitted the possibility of spontaneous generation, because he had no scientific counterexplanation of the many reported cases in the medical and veterinary literature. After reviewing Pasteur’s work, however, he concluded that “the malady never arises spontaneously.” The fact that a vaccine made from the spinal cords of infected animals produced, in most cases, resistance to subsequent, more serious exposure meant that all cases of rabies were transmitted by bite, scratch, or other contact with the saliva of a rabid animal.

The public health implications were clear. Rabies could be controlled in either of two ways. Mass immunization of potentially vulnerable animals was considered impracticable by Fleming and his fellow committee members, because they did not think it would be possible to overcome the reluctance of dog owners. The other alternative was suggested by Pasteur himself. Because the sea presented an insurmountable barrier to migrating wild animals (or roving domestic ones) that might carry rabies, he had been puzzled by British interest in large-scale vaccination. “You do not require it in England at all,” he told Victor Horsley, a surgeon and the secretary of the Local Government Board committee. “I have proved that this is an infectious disease: all you have to do is to establish a brief quarantine covering the incubation period, muzzle all your dogs at the present moment, and in a few years you will be free.”

A large part of the British public greeted the news that it was about to be released from a terrifying scourge not with gratitude and relief, however, but with outrage. They viewed the carefully weighed and formulated conclusions of the most distinguished scientists and the highest government officials as evidence of a renewed conspiracy against animals (especially dogs) and their advocates. The very prestige of the endorsement seemed an index of the seriousness of the threat. Anti-vivisectionists led a coalition that ranged from sentimental dog lovers to anti-modernizing members of the medical profession in a sustained attack on Pasteur, who became a symbol of all that was most objectionable in experimental science.

To discover the infectious nature of rabies, Pasteur had injected numbers of healthy animals with matter from infected animals, and observed the formerly healthy animals die horrible deaths. To produce the vaccine, he used this same technique to maintain a supply of rabid rabbits. Thus, Pasteur’s main laboratory, as well as the Pasteur Institutes that were quickly established across Europe to dispense rabies treatment, were seen to inflict incredible suffering on animals, even if they offered relief to people.
Anti-vivisectionists also disputed the scientific consensus that Pasteur’s theory was correct and that his vaccine worked. Some criticized from a para-scientific point of view, expressing concern about the secrecy surrounding his experiments [a concern that had also prompted the Local Government Board to duplicate the experiments before endorsing Pasteur’s results] or characterizing his work as “very brilliant, but . . . not solid.” Or their denial could take the form of name-calling: “M. Pasteur’s excuses and inconsistencies are of exactly the same kind as those of the vulgar quack to be found in every country market-place and every country fair.”

Some critics claimed that the Institutes spread disease rather than cured it. Then as now, a small number of the patients who had undergone the series of inoculations after being bitten by rabid animals subsequently died of rabies. Such cases were eagerly exploited as evidence that Pasteur and his scientific supporters were no better than murderers. The Institutes were also said to threaten the health of those who lived nearby. The stables of infected animals maintained by Pasteur’s laboratories—“cesspools of disease” in the words of one anti-vivisectionist—were independent hazards.

“Wherever a Pasteur Institute has sprung up,” charged Thomas Dolan, a Yorkshire physician, in 1890, “the number bitten by tabid dogs has increased.”

The scientific case against Pasteur was never strong, and those who tried to make it were driven quickly to forlorn claims that rabies might arise spontaneously in people as well as animals, that Pasteur cured only patients whose bites had already been cauterized [the only even moderately effective treatment known before the vaccine] or who had not really been infected, or that perfectly effective folk cures existed in remote rural districts. The weakness of this evidence did not diminish the fervor or the convictions of anti-vivisectionists, however, because these were fueled from another source.

The real objection to Pasteur was more radical and profound, based on moral revulsion rather than flaws in experimental method. Anti-vivisectionists were ready to condemn the whole physiological and pharmacological enterprise of which Pasteur was only the most visible and obnoxious representative. When they asserted “on moral grounds” that “a system founded . . . on horrible cruelty, could not in a moral universe be fraught with any good,” they implicitly rejected the universe of experimental science, in which goodness was not a measure of truth. When they claimed that “the natural heart, as well as the educated instincts, of Englishmen, at least, rise up in arms against the official formulation and recognition of such a system,” they challenged the legitimacy of scientifically based public health policy. The breadth of these challenges attracted many who were not even especially interested in the technical aspects of medical research. Instead, they were eager to commit themselves publicly to the priority of higher, non-materialistic principles in spheres dominated by pragmatism.

Pasteur’s theory also indirectly provoked a less exotic and probably more widespread resistance. Although they were less ideologically self-conscious than the anti-vivisectionists, the dog owners who resented muzzling and quarantine similarly preferred emotional satisfaction to improved public health. The most respectable animal-oriented organizations, such as the Kennel Club and the RSPCA, endorsed official anti-rabies measures, but other groups, like the Dog Owners Protection Association, characterized such measures as “vexatious, tyrannical, and arbitrary interference on the part of the authorities.” There was enough grassroots opposition to inhibit local enforcement. Municipal and county authorities, responding to the wishes of their constituents, were reluctant to declare rabies outbreaks and activate control mechanisms. For this reason, when the Board of Agriculture was created in 1889, it was given the power to impose anti-rabies measures in any area it deemed threatened. The results were dramatic. In 1889, there were 312 reported cases of rabies in dogs and 30 registered human deaths; after four years of central enforcement, the numbers had fallen to 38 and 6. Assuming that this demonstration would persuade even the most recalcitrant local authorities, the government returned responsibility for rabies enforcement to them in 1892. The number of cases soared immediately and the Board of Agriculture had to take over again in 1897. In 1902, Britain was declared free of rabies, but even this complete practical vindication did not justify the Board’s policy in the view of many dissidents, who continued to protest until the bitter end.

It is hard to interpret the suppression of rabies in Great Britain as a conventional scientific success story. Parallel to the discovery of its treatment and cause, and to the implementation of effective public health measures based on that discovery,
ran a consistent rejection of not only the research and the policy, but also the moral assumptions on which they were based. Anti-vivisectionists valued purity more than truth, at least as it was defined by late-19th-century secular authorities; they preferred preventing sinful aggression (the torture of animals and, more profoundly, the violent scientific prying into God’s creation) to saving lives.

The vigorous activity of anti-vivisection groups into the 1890s showed the wide appeal of this subversive reordering of priorities. But the anti-vivisection movement collapsed suddenly in the first part of the 20th century. The example of rabies suggests the reason. Although many people were willing to equivocate as long as they possibly could, only the most adamant opponents of experimental science would have been willing to deny themselves achieved freedom from a terrifying disease for the sake of principle. The discovery of diphtheria antitoxin in 1894, which promised to save thousands of lives each year and which would not have been possible without experiments on live animals, was a decisive blow. Anti-vivisection lost its ability to mobilize public sympathy and came to occupy a position on the outer fringes of respectable opinion.

Nevertheless, public sympathy did not disappear; it remained latent, ready to be reactivated. The late-19th-century anti-vivisection movement had not exactly been defeated on its own terms; no one had proved that the scientific view of the world was morally preferable. Instead, it succumbed to the overwhelming pragmatic achievement of the opposition. Continuing advances in immunology and other areas protected biomedical research from anti-vivisectionist protest for much of the first part of this century, as did the prestige enveloping the entire scientific enterprise. Lately, however, the benefits of research have become less obvious while the dangers have become more evident, and suspicion has mixed with admiration in the public attitudes toward science. Once again, many citizens have begun to judge science according to their own moral standards, rather than accepting the measures of professional achievement that scientists apply to themselves. And again, experimentation on animals has become a touchstone for these opposing points of view.

After a century of scientific progress and social change, the alternative positions have changed remarkably little. In 1875, Charles Darwin reluctantly joined Thomas Huxley’s scientific lobby against the legislative efforts of anti-vivisectionists because, although he was no vivisector himself and he abhorred inflicting suffering, he believed that the potential contributions of the flowering science of physiology outweighed his personal repugnance. Current exponents of this position often stress that they are making the same relative judgment.

Sometimes they emphasize the scientific benefits that have resulted from animal experimentation. For example, Dean Franklin M. Loew of the Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine (the keynote speaker at the October 1983 PRIM&R conference) showed a series of slides illustrating the role that experimentation on animals played in the discoveries of great scientists like Galen, Galvani, Bernard, and Koch; contrapuntally, he showed a cartoon of white-coated scientists in a cage. The cartoon represented what he believed that the public wants to do with animal experimenters, thus eliminating the possibility of future advances equivalent to those of the past. In 1979, W.D.M. Paton made the same point more sensationally in an article supporting the use of animals in biomedical research. His illustrations were not just graphs and charts, but photographs of people suffering from advanced cases of loathsome diseases that had been overcome as a result of vivisection-based research.35)

Sometimes scientists at the PRIM&R conference emphasized the other side of their decision—their reluctance to inflict pain on experimental animals. Joseph Spinelli, the veterinarian who heads the Animal Care Facility at the University of California’s medical school at San Francisco, described his institution’s stringent enforcement of pain standards stricter than those mandated by the Federal government and expressed his personal view that no animal should be made to suffer. Like several other speakers, he pointed out that most scientists, whether for emotional or for financial reasons, would prefer not to experiment on animals if they could achieve the same results in some other way. He recommended a careful evaluation of the cost–benefit ratio of any proposed experiment that would use animals, especially one that would inflict pain.

In his keynote speech, Dean Loew explained that the purpose of the conference was to help
the scientific community understand the complexities of the current controversy over animal experimentation and to cope with legislative changes likely to occur in the near future. Such changes are likely because of rising public sentiment for animal protection, fanned and organized by several different groups. As in the 19th century, only a few of these groups can be called anti-vivisectionists. Others, including then and now the various SPCAs, are primarily concerned with humane regulation of laboratory experiments, especially on primates and domestic animals like dogs and cats.

PRIM&R asked several representatives of groups in the latter category to address its conference, including William H. Curran, the Director of the Law Enforcement Division of the Massachusetts SPCA, Henry Spira, the Coordinator of the Coalition to Abolish LD-50 and the Draize Test, and Connie Kagan, the Chair of the Animal Political Action Committee. Kagan advocates legislation to increase Federal control of animal-related research, and Spira has targeted the way that cosmetics manufacturers test the irritating qualities of new products on the eyes of rabbits. The structure of the program implicitly defined both as extremists by putting them on a panel that also included the most truculent representative of what might be called the right-to-research point of view. This was Frankie Trull, the Executive Director of the Association for Biomedical Research.* Trull was the only speaker to refer to organized animal welfare groups as “the enemy”; she urged scientists to organize to protect their intellectual freedom from being compromised by regulatory interference and new administrative burdens.

The real extreme of the animal welfare movement—the only part of it that can appropriately be called anti-vivisectionist—was, however, not represented at the conference. According to a 1982 internal report prepared at Harvard University, the “most diligent, tactical and clear thinking” groups within the movement are not regulationists, such as those who spoke at the PRIM&R conference, but abolitionists. Although such groups as the Society for Animal Rights and Attorneys for Animal Rights constitute a minority of animal advocates, they have, according to the Harvard report, been disproportionately successful in arousing popular feeling. “Dogmatic” and “professional” in their approach, these organizations value the rights of animal subjects more highly than scientific progress. Abjuring “speciesism,” they regard the claims of animals as similar to those of human beings, whose rights as experimental subjects have been elaborately protected by law.30

Some of PRIM&R’s speakers did refer to people who object strongly to animal experimentation without acknowledging the overriding claims of its scientific necessity and its ultimate benefit to mankind, but such people were not characterized as politically or philosophically sophisticated. Instead, they were presented as untrained sentimentalists who happened to glimpse the operations of a laboratory in the course of their duties—secretaries, nurses, cleaning personnel—or members of the surrounding community who heard garbled accounts of experiments from such impromptu observers. Most speakers supposed that similarly sentimental naiveté was what animated those citizens who wrote anguished letters to their members of Congress. In both the plenary sessions and the smaller conference workshops, many scientific administrators stressed the importance of public education, both within the immediate neighborhood of research institutions and on a national level.

This optimistic interpretation of the resistance to experimentation on live animals may explain the tone of the PRIM&R conference, which was strikingly temperate. Dean Loew announced at the outset that the purpose was not to debate pros and cons, and most speakers seemed to share the sense, expressed by Andrew Rowan, also of Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine, that everyone was really on the same side. The scientists would prefer not to use animals and the representatives of humane societies actually understood the need for biomedical research. All it will take is a little enlightened compromise to protect animals from abuse without stopping scientific progress.37

Rowan dismissed people whose objections could not be disposed of in this pragmatic way as Luddites. Arthur Caplan, a philosopher from the Hastings Institute who focused on the ethical issues, further reassured the conference that thoughtful advocates of both sides—sensitive scientists and sensible anti-vivisectionists—were not too far apart on some basic questions. They agreed on the need

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* The Association’s more than 200 members include chemical and pharmaceutical companies and animal breeding laboratories, as well as universities, hospitals, and other non-profit institutions. One of the group’s goals is to monitor proposed legislative and regulatory changes that affect the use and supply of research animals.
for research, on whether animals are morally equal to people, and on the moral priority of animal ethics issues. The predominant rhetoric of harmony and cooperation gave little explicit indication that the biomedical community was facing what the internal Harvard University report had referred to as a “formidable challenge.”

Nevertheless, conference participants seemed to share a sense of being on the frontlines, under attack by a softhearted public easily moved to outrage. Unless it could be re-educated, the public would continue to constitute a potentially serious impediment to research, especially when public opinion was reflected in legislative action. Both academic researchers and private-sector scientists worried about the additional regulation that might result from heightened legislative concern over animal experimentation, and some speakers suggested that current procedures were oppressive.

Conference participants frequently accused the press of stirring up public sympathies by sensationalistic reporting. The most acute resentment of media coverage surfaced in the workshop on “Public/Media Perception of Animal Research Issues,” which attracted approximately 40 participants on the last afternoon of the conference. Because most animal research laboratories are vulnerable to anti-vivisectionists who want easy targets for adverse media publicity, scientists and research administrators in this session acknowledged the sense of threat and antagonism that had been submerged in most of the plenary presentations. Several participants advised that scientists who ventured to speak directly with the press, rather than using public relations experts as intermediaries, were asking for trouble.

A quick survey of recent periodical indexes suggests that scientists exaggerate the extent to which the press subjects their research to constant and hostile scrutiny. Journalistic attention to animal experimentation has, in fact, been rather intermittent in the last few years. Between March 1981 and September 1982, the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature reported less than one entry per month under the heading of animal experimentation; items appeared with only slightly greater frequency in the New York Times Index for 1982 and the first part of 1983. (On the other hand, the Boston Globe for 4 October 1983 did headline the decorous PRIM&R conference as a “clash.”)

Nevertheless, throughout the discussion, the press was blamed for the attitudes of the general public. It was assumed that these attitudes would be inimical to the interests of science unless they were manipulated carefully. And, in some cases, it was feared, no matter how legitimate the research, no manipulation would be possible. Undisciplined sentimentality and indifference to or incomprehension of scientific methods and goals made it unlikely, for example, that Americans would ever approve of the shooting of anaesthetized dogs so that scientists could study gunshot wounds; experimenters at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences found this out in July 1983—to their distress and to the embarrassment of the Pentagon. The principal investigator of that experiment was at the workshop, and placed the blame for the “media-inspired” furor on an anti-vivisectionist “member of the board” of the Washington Post.

In the animal experimentation debates, as on other issues, scientists tend to dismiss those they cannot persuade, whether the opponents are softhearted pet lovers or philosophers who argue that people have no right to exploit other species for their own benefit. Despite the denials of many speakers at the PRIM&R conference, there are two sides to the animal experimentation issue; when push comes to shove, these viewpoints may be irreconcilable. Although many scientists and members of humane organizations are working for compromises that will allow research to proceed without inflicting suffering on animals, such compromises accept the premises of one side while rejecting the premises of the other. They recognize scientific progress or freedom of investigation as a good that must, in some circumstances, override the rights or feelings of animal subjects. To the extent that ordinary sober citizens do not endorse this moral calculus, as many did not in the Victorian era, anti-vivisectionism will flourish. In a period of public recoil from many of the products of science and technology, the prospects for a speedy ebb of anti-vivisectionist sentiment are uncertain.

Notes


4. For example, the American Anti-Vivisection Society and the New England Anti-Vivisection Society in the United States, and the National Anti-Vivisection Society and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Vivisection in Great Britain.

5. One indication of this historical consciousness is the recent republication by the Society for Animal Rights of Henry S. Salt’s Animals’ Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress, which originally appeared in 1892. The new edition [Clarks Summit, PA: Society for Animal Rights, 1980] includes a preface by Peter Singer.


11. Ibid., p. 149.


13. Ibid., p. 84.

14. He also objected to shooting, see Salt, op. cit., pp. 92–94.

15. “Publications of Vivisection” and “Publications on Vivisection 1875–1883,” n.p. These are the first of a series of eight scrapbooks that Jesse amassed on the topic; The Standard, 10 November 1886.


19. The Select Committee on the Bill to Prevent the Spreading of Canine Madness (1830), the Committee appointed by the Local Government Board to inquire into M. Pasteur’s Treatment of Hydrophobia (1887), the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Rabies in Dogs [1887], and the Departmental Committee to inquire into and report upon the working of the Laws relating to Dogs [1897].


25. Horsley’s recollections appeared in The British Medical Journal, which is quoted in Lise Wilkinson, “The development of the virus concept, as reflected in corpora of studies on individual pathogens. 4. Rabies—two millenia of ideas and conjectures on the aetiology of a virus disease.” Medical History, Volume 21, Number 1 [January 1977]: 30. It is interesting that none of these authorities considered the possibility that cats or wild animals would continue to harbor the disease and infect even a muzzled, registered, and quarantined dog population. The 1887 House of Lords Committee received evidence about both rabid cats and rabid foxes. Nevertheless, a program focused exclusively on dogs ul-
timely succeeded in eradicating rabies from Britain, which is strong prima facie evidence of the absence of sylvatic infection. According to a modern veterinary scientist, however, “because of the wandering habits of rabid dogs and the extreme susceptibility of the fox to experimental infection, it seems very curious that sylvatic infection has not occurred” [see Hole, op. cit., p. 244].


33. Turner, op. cit., p. 115.


37. For a more elaborate statement of this view, see Andrew N. Rowan and Bernard E. Rollin, “Animal Research—For and Against: A Philosophical, Social, and Historical Perspective,” Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, Volume 27, Number 1 [Autumn 1983]: 1–17.