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Why I use animals in my research

A UCLA scientist targeted by animal rights activists justifies her work.

November 01, 2007 | Edythe London | Edythe London is a professor of psychiatry and bio-behavioral sciences and of molecular and medical pharmacology at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

For years, I have watched with growing concern as my UCLA colleagues have been subjected to increasing harassment, violence and threats by animal rights extremists. In the last 15 months, these attempts at intimidation have included the placement of a Molotov cocktail-type device at a colleague's home and another under a colleague's car -- thankfully, they didn't ignite -- as well as rocks thrown through windows, phone and e-mail threats, banging on doors in the middle of the night and, on several occasions, direct confrontations with young children.

Then, several weeks ago, an article in the San Francisco Chronicle about the work I have been doing to understand and treat nicotine addition among adolescents informed readers that some of my research is done on primates. I was instantly on my guard. Would I be the next victim? Would the more extremist elements of the animal rights movement now turn their sights on me?

The answer came this week when the Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility for vandalism that caused between $20,000 and $30,000 worth of damage to my home after extremists broke a window and inserted a garden hose, flooding the interior. Later, in a public statement addressed to me, the extremists said they had been torn between flooding my house or setting it afire. Maybe I should feel lucky.

Having come to the United States as the child of Holocaust survivors who had lost almost everything, I appreciate that perhaps "only in America" could I have fulfilled my dream of becoming a biomedical scientist, supported in doing research to reduce human suffering. But it is difficult for me to understand why the same country that was founded on the idea of freedom for all gives rise to an organization like the Animal Liberation Front, a shadowy group identified by the FBI as a domestic terrorism threat, which threatens the safety of researchers engaged in animal studies that are crucial to moving medicine forward.

I have devoted my career to understanding how nicotine, methamphetamine and other drugs can hijack brain chemistry and leave the affected individual at the mercy of his or her addiction. My personal connection to addiction is rooted in the untimely death of my father, who died of complications of nicotine dependence. My work on the neurobiology of addiction has spanned three decades of my life -- most of this time as a senior scientist at the National Institutes of Health. To me, nothing could be more important than solving the mysteries of addiction and learning how we can restore a person's control over his or her own life. Addiction robs young people of their futures, destroys families and places a tremendous burden on society.

Animal studies allow us to test potential treatments without confounding factors, such as prior drug use and other experiences that complicate human studies. Even more important, they allow us to test possibly life-saving treatments before they are considered safe to test in humans. Our animal studies address the effects of chronic drug use on brain functions, such as decision-making and self-control, that are impaired in human addicts. We are also testing potential treatments, and all of our studies comply with federal laws designed to ensure humane care.

While monkeys receive drugs in the laboratory, they do not become "addicted" in the same sense that humans become addicted. Still, we are able to see how changes in brain chemistry alter the way the brain works -- knowledge that is vital to the design of effective medications.

My colleagues and I place a huge value on the welfare of our research subjects. We constantly strive to minimize the risk to them; however, a certain amount of risk is necessary to provide us with the information we need in a rigorously scientific manner. Since the incident at my house, our research has gotten a lot of attention. Some anti-smoking groups have raised questions about the fact that our work was funded by Philip Morris USA. Is it moral to allow the tobacco

industry to fund research on addiction? My view is that the problem of tobacco dependence is enormous, and the resources available for research on the problem are limited. It would, therefore, be immoral to decline an opportunity to increase our knowledge about addiction and develop new treatments for quitting smoking, especially when teens are involved. Few people are untouched by the scourge of addiction in their friends or family. It is through work like ours that the understanding of addiction expands and gives rise to hope that we can help people like my father live longer, healthier lives.

Thousands of other scientists use laboratory animals in other research, giving hope to those afflicted with a wide variety of ailments. Already, one scientist at UCLA has announced that he will not pursue potentially important studies involving how the brain receives information from the retina, for fear of the violence that animal rights radicals might visit on his family. We must not allow these extremists to stop important research that advances the human condition.