

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Animals in research

The dramatic progress of biomedical science over the past century has relied heavily on the use of experimental animals. While mice, rats, rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs have been the most widely-used animals in biological research, primates have most often been a key element in clinical and behavioural studies. The excesses of scientific and technological development have resulted in a backlash, that has spawned many activist groups. In recent times, the cries of 'animal rights groups' have been heard clearly across the world, leading to increasing concern on the issue of the use of animals in scientific research. A great deal of biological research that needlessly uses animals is pedestrian and dispensable. However, there is a considerable area of medical research, where the judicious use of animals is the key to scientific and clinical success. Many of these areas hold great promise for the alleviation of human disease. It is, therefore, critical that we weigh the merits of the case, for the use of animals in research, carefully and dispassionately.

In the last few weeks, a set of rules, drafted by a governmental group, which goes by the Orwellian name of 'Committee for the Purpose of Controlling and Supervising Experiments on Animals' (CPCSEA), has disturbed an important section of the biological research community. This Committee, headed by Ms Maneka Gandhi, presently Minister of State for Welfare, has now decided to impose drastic curbs on the use of animals in scientific research and has assumed the power to decide all details on the course of animal-based experiments in future. If the guidelines are accepted by the Government, much of biological research in India will come to a standstill, as scientists grapple with a mountain of red tape, which will quickly be erected by an ever-eager bureaucracy. The Committee has chosen to ignore the fact that most major biomedical institutions already have in place 'ethics committees' and mechanisms which regulate research with experimental animals. Indeed, the Indian National Science Academy has

produced and circulated guidelines for the use of animals in experimental research. Interestingly, the report (excerpts of which are reproduced on page 346) also avoids defining the biological term 'animal', while going on to precisely define the term 'committee'. While monkeys, dogs, cats, goats and rabbits may have been uppermost in the Committee's concerns, the rules might just as well apply to *Drosophila*, the fruit flies so beloved amongst molecular biologists. The proposed rules inhibit the transfer of animals and possibly even the import of special strains of laboratory animals. Coming at a time when the use of transgenic animals and specifically inbred strains is assuming special importance in biological research, such regulations are likely to become a major impediment in the future.

Curiously, the heads of major scientific agencies and institutions, charged with the conduct of biomedical research, were indeed members of the committee, which drafted the new rules. Did they not realize that the biomedical research community, which is their major constituency, will be completely hamstrung by the new diktat? Maybe the only lesson that might be learned is well known; that committees can often be railroaded by chairpersons, who have 'not so hidden agendas' to pursue. On reflection, institutions and researchers, engaged in biomedical science, might do well to reexamine their own procedures for regulating animal-based research. Strict self-policing might be the best way to avoid governmental initiatives, like the CPCSEA. Maintaining animal houses, which follow strict guidelines is a difficult undertaking and sitting in judgement on a colleague's request for experimental animals may be embarrassing. However, in order to avoid imposition of the rules formulated by CPCSEA, biomedical institutions and agencies would do well to reformulate their policy towards animal experimentation and provide a credible alternative.

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