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NATURE | EDITORIAL

Italian scientists fight back on animal testing

Demonstrators call for public awareness of the rationales for using animals in the lab

About 300 researchers and students from around Italy demonstrated in Milan on 1 June to increase awareness of the need for lab animals in biomedical research. The protest was a reply to what the researchers call a “witch-hunt” led by animal-rights activists.

“A worrying disinformation is spreading — extremism by animal-rights activists has a huge media impact,” said Heather Bondi, a neurobiology doctoral student from the University of Insubria in Busto Arsizio. “We had never thought of talking about these controversial ethical issues to people, but now it is time to oppose the false truth propagated by extremists.” In the largest event of its kind ever held in Italy, activists marching with the slogan ‘Let’s fight for research, let’s fight for life’ were summoned near Milan’s central Piazza del Duomo by Pro-Test Italia, the Italian chapter of an organization started in response to animal-rights activism.

Speakers described how animal experiments are conducted in fields from neuroscience to surgery, and explained how clinical trials work. Among the speakers was Tom Holder, one of the founders of the first Pro-Test group, based in the United Kingdom. Students wearing white coats talked to passers-by and distributed pamphlets.

About 30 animal-rights activists provided a counterpoint to the protest, shouting, “Assassins!” Police looked on to prevent verbal exchanges from growing into physical skirmishes.

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The demonstration was triggered by acts of force by animal-rights activists, most recently on 20 April, when five members of Fermare Green Hill (Stop Green Hill), an animal-rights group focused on shutting down the Green Hill dog-breeding facility in Montichiari, broke into an animal-research facility at the University of Milan. They mixed up cage labels and animals, and left with around 100 mice and one rabbit.

“Institutions could do more. They should start a serious programme of scientific disclosure,” said Bice Chini, a molecular and cell biologist at the National Research Council’s Institute of Neuroscience in Milan. “Researchers should not only open their laboratories, but also give out information outside supermarkets.”

Saturday’s demonstration was born out of an initiative by students and young researchers who met on Facebook. “These guys realized that the public doesn’t know what research is, and what we do in our laboratories,” said Giuliano Grignaschi, who heads the animal care unit at the Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research in Milan, and a spokesperson for the Basel Declaration Society in Switzerland, which promotes information about animal testing. “We are guilty too, for we don’t give out information, and that is why researchers today are talking with people, trying to establish a dialogue,” said Grignaschi.

“I hope that, starting from today, public opinion understands who lies, because we are not assassins,” said Gaia Gobbo, a graduate student in biotechnology at the University of Bologna.

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Fermare Green Hill has scheduled a new demonstration on 8 June in front of the animal-research facility at University of Milan.

NATURE BLOG

Liberated’ mice from Italian lab now housed in poor conditions

Two months after animal-rights activists broke into an animal facility at the University of Milan and removed hundreds of animals, photographs of many of the mice have appeared on the Facebook page of one of the protestors’ supporters who uses the pen name Jooleea Carleenee.

The raid took place on 20 April. Researchers at the university said that they lost years of their work along with the animals, most of which were genetically modified mice serving as models for disease. They said that they did not expect mutants that were particularly delicate, or immunosuppressed ‘nude’ mice, to survive outside controlled laboratory conditions.

Carleenee says that she posted the pictures to show that the animals were still alive. But the images of the overcrowded and uncontrolled conditions in which the mice appear to have been kept in her home have fuelled a new row, with scientists posting angry comments, complaining of cruelty.

Daria Giovannoni, president of the pro-science lobby group Pro-Test Italia, says: “If these photos show the actual conditions of the stolen mice, we’re seriously concerned about their well-being and health: we don’t think that these animals are faring better now than when they were in the laboratory.”

The raid on 20 April spurred the nascent Pro-Test Italia — modelled on UK and US Pro-Test organizations — to action. It arranged a series of demonstrations by scientists in defence of their work on animals.

UPDATE: 28 June, 2013 We have been contacted by Jooleea Carleenee who requests that we report that the mice are now being kept in humane conditions and that the pictures showed only a temporary situation when the mice arrived with her.

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RESEARCH | HIGHLIGHT

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Rescuing cocaine-induced prefrontal cortex hypoactivity prevents compulsive cocaine seeking.

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Abstract

Loss of control over harmful drug seeking is one of the most intractable aspects of addiction, as human substance abusers continue to pursue drugs despite incurring significant negative consequences. Human studies have suggested that deficits in prefrontal cortical function and consequential loss of inhibitory control could be crucial in promoting compulsive drug use. However, it remains unknown whether chronic drug use compromises cortical activity and, equally important, whether this deficit promotes compulsive cocaine seeking. Here we use a rat model of compulsive drug seeking in which cocaine seeking persists in a subgroup of rats despite delivery of noxious foot shocks. We show that prolonged cocaine self-administration decreases ex vivo intrinsic excitability of deep-layer pyramidal neurons in the prelimbic cortex, which was significantly more pronounced in compulsive drug-seeking animals. Furthermore, compensating for hypoactive prelimbic cortex neurons with in vivo optogenetic prelimbic cortex stimulation significantly prevented compulsive cocaine seeking, whereas optogenetic prelimbic cortex inhibition significantly increased compulsive cocaine seeking. Our results show a marked reduction in prelimbic cortex excitability in compulsive cocaine-seeking rats, and that in vivo optogenetic prelimbic cortex stimulation decreased compulsive drug-seeking behaviours. Thus, targeted stimulation of the prefrontal cortex could serve as a promising therapy for treating compulsive drug use.