

New Report Backs Scientific Research on Monkeys

A new report published today ¹ recommends that scientific research on monkeys should continue in the UK subject to rigorous safeguards.

The report reviews research on non-human primates starting over a ten-year period from 1996. It emphasises that each new application for funding of research should be subject to careful review of the scientific value of the research, the probability of medical or social benefit, the availability of alternative approaches and the likelihood and extent of animal suffering.

Techniques such as imaging the brains of living humans could replace work on monkeys and is cited as just one of the improvements that are likely to emerge in coming years that could be implemented in new research programmes.

The report, which was commissioned by the main funders of primate research in the UK ², was produced by a panel of distinguished scientists and animal welfare experts chaired by Professor Sir Patrick Bateson FRS. The overall finding was that much of the research considered was outstanding in its quality, in its care for the animals used and in its likely benefits to medicine. Such work should be supported. However in a few cases, the justification for the work was judged inadequate or insufficient.

Professor Bateson said: “Scientific research on monkeys is hugely controversial and raises strong emotions, but an all-or-nothing approach to research on non-human primates would have been stupid. Our recommendations, some of which are already being implemented, will lead to high standards of animal care and the rapid transfer of research findings to medical applications with benefits for both humans and other animals. Nevertheless, we found that some research projects were unlikely to be beneficial and the claims made for them were implausible. In my view, funding of work on non-human primates should not be continued if no effort has been made to demonstrate the potential medical and social benefits of the work.”

The Panel examined the publications of scientists who had been funded and the questionnaires they had been asked to complete. 72 questionnaires were sent out to grant-holders and 67 (93%) were completed. Of the small number of grant-holders who failed to respond, some had died, and some had gone abroad and could not be traced.

Panel members made independent assessments of the scientific quality of the research, the welfare costs to the animal used and the likely benefits to medicine and the public good. Assessment of potential medical benefits was often speculative because considerable time usually elapses between the publication of original research and translation of the findings into successful therapies.

The Panel’s assessments were brought together to make an overall judgement about whether or not the research had been justified, and the availability of alternatives was also taken into account. The Panel agreed that in many cases the use of non-human primates was justifiable. The Panel was particularly struck by the benefits of funding research in interdisciplinary groups with clinical links where knowledge is readily transferred and medical benefits are most easily exploited. The Panel applauded cases where refinements of technique reducing the welfare costs to the monkeys had been developed and published.

For further information or interviews with Professor Bateson please contact him on 0754 522 6396 or at his e-mail address ppgb@cam.ac.uk.

*Notes to editors

(1) The report is called *Review of research using non-human primates*

(2) The research on non-human primates was supported by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Medical Research Council, the National Centre for Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research and the Wellcome Trust. These funding bodies jointly commissioned the Review.

(3) The Review was commissioned on the recommendation of a working group chaired by Sir David Weatherall FRS, FMedSci. The report, published in 2006, was called *The use of non-human primates in research*.