

Hypocrisy and Huntingdon Life Sciences

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Last month, 10 enthusiastic animal rights advocates very nearly shut down Britain's biggest animal testing laboratory, Huntingdon Life Sciences. The Bank of Scotland demanded that HLS repay a £22 Million overdraft forthwith: its plummeting share prices, after appalling publicity about cruel practices, protests and campaigning by the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty group (SHAC). Direct action against HLS investors, shareholders, bank and HLS customers and workers and – coincidentally it seems – 11 firebombs under HLS employee's cars, exhausted the Bank's willingness to engage with its client. In its anxiety, the Bank even agreed to write off £11 Million of its debt for a token £1.

All this was because, in 1997, Channel 4 broadcast film showing Huntingdon workers punching beagles while taking blood samples, taken by an undercover reporter. An official investigation led to prosecutions and the temporary suspension of the company's licence. Its US activities resulted in animal cruelty prosecutions. SHAC has been on the warpath since 1999. Incredibly, at the end of 2000, documents were leaked about revolting (but legal) experiments at HLS's Cambridge site involving the transplantation of the hearts of genetically engineered pigs into monkeys. More than a quarter of the animals died in surgery, one because they slipped up and popped in a frozen heart. The Home Office was forced to investigate these Dr Moreau experiments into xenotransplantation, and I can't say any more without being sued.

But you can see why animal rights activists think it wouldn't be too bad to stop animal experimentation like this, though HLS, though it employs more than a thousand workers. It's a question of values – though the extremism of some supporters has lost them the high moral ground.

The protestors didn't win, actually. Not yet. The Bank deal left HLS in better financial shape. The government came to HLS's rescue. In the same week as it legislated to outlaw fox hunting with dogs, government's science Minister, Lord Sainsbury, brokered an agreement to refinance HLS. He also allowed the Stock Exchange to permit HLS's new backers to remain anonymous, against normal trading rules.

How can it be all right to experiment on animals as a routine practice, and come to that to force-breed them – often in revolting conditions – for supermarkets, but not to kill a few foxes?

Health Minister Hunt said that animal research remained essential to the discovery of medicines and the assessment of safety and efficacy of treatments. But as animal rightists point out, most of HLS's work is contract, commercial work and is as likely to relate to paints and potions as 'medicine'.

Every year about 50 million animals die in laboratories in the cause of human health and pharmaceutical company sales, around the world. Millions more – bred for experimentation, cloned or genetically engineered but thought not suitable for the purpose - are killed without being used. Is this acceptable? In the last 30 years we have changed our views on the proper treatment of animals, not just vivisection, but animals raised to be eaten – veal calves, sows and battery hens – and cosmetics testing. Still there are no real alternatives for all animal research.

If you go to one of the HLS laboratories you'll see marmosets in spacious cages, in family groups, with room to exercise and 'forage' for food, bred for experimentation and quite comfortable until they are used, killed and examined. No animal lover could help but be distressed to see monkeys who have never seen a jungle; dogs who have never had a country walk, cats who have never climbed a tree. But rats who have never crapped in your ceiling?

86% of the experimental mammals, bred so that they can be pumped with chemicals and then killed, are rodents. Dogs and cats are about .4%,
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monkeys and apes about .2% of animals bred for research. You can't go to a doctor without getting a treatment that was tested on animals. But how far is it proper to inflict suffering on animals to ensure the safety of new products for commercial sale and use in our homes, work, services, or 'treatments' that are devised for profit?

My personal position is clear enough. I fudge. I agreed to join an advisory board of an experimental institute, once, then took a tour of their facilities and saw pregnant sheep in pens in the basement – permanently - that would be killed once they had delivered. I resigned. I don't use animal-tested cosmetics, but I got the flu vaccine that some rat died for. I want real alternatives to animal testing, now. I can't live with my own ambiguity.