



Difficult Issues

Some of the major advances in medical science would not have been possible without the use of animals in research – insulin, penicillin and anaesthetics, to name but a few. Evidence shows that public opinion now largely supports this necessary work, as long as it can be shown to have direct benefits for human health. *Colin Blakemore*, well known for his stance on the use of animals in scientific research, explains why he thinks it is important for scientists to stand up and be counted.

About 90% of the British public support the use of animals in research, as long as the medical benefits are evident, and as long as the numbers of animals involved are kept to a minimum and they do not suffer unnecessarily – the opinion polls are very clear on this. The law in Britain that governs the use of animals in research is the toughest in the world and I think if the general public understood more about how the law works, they would be even more supportive.

But when it comes to scientists speaking out on this issue, I should first

like to point out that, of the small number of researchers who have gone public on this issue, I do not know of anyone who, as a result of speaking out, has been targeted by animal rights extremists. I have, but my targeting began *before* I became publicly committed to defending animal research. So those people who have been courageous enough to engage in public dialogue on this issue have not found themselves targeted. Second, there is strength in numbers. It may be easy for the small number of extreme activists – because the numbers are very small – to target a small number of

scientists who are prepared to talk. But if there were 10,000 scientists all willing to speak publicly about their work, then where is the target?

Furthermore, I would take a moral position on this. I think that scientists have a duty to speak to the public about what they do. After all, whatever kind of research one does and whatever form of funding one has, in the end the money comes from the public. Whether it comes from a research council, a charity, or even from industry, in the end the money is coming from the public purse. We have an obligation to report back to the public about what we are doing with their money.

Finally, if we want the respect of our families, our friends and the community in which we live, we must be open about our work. To be secretive implies guilt and we absolutely should not feel guilty about what we do. What we do is honourable and good, and we have to be brave enough to defend it. ■

Each year millions of people in this country benefit from treatments which have been developed on animals	
35,000	treated for breast cancer
180,000	diabetics use insulin
3,000,000	operations using anaesthetics
30,000,000	prescriptions for asthma
50,000,000	prescriptions for antibiotics

The full text of Blakemore's interview with Cherry Lewis can be found at: www.bris.ac.uk/neuroscience/news/features/mrc_roadshow/blakemore