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Researchers explain importance of their experiments with animals

By Sarah Kitchen
 Of the Emerald

About 20 researchers had experiments that were either destroyed or partially damaged as a result of Sunday's laboratory break-in.

The vandals, calling themselves the Animal Liberation Front, destroyed \$50,000 worth of equipment and stole 150 laboratory animals, including cats, hamsters, rats and rabbits.

One strain of hamster stolen in Sunday's break-in was developed at the University by Dr. Michael Menaker and was the only one of its kind to exist in the world, he said.

Menaker was using the hamsters to study circadian systems, the internal clock of an animal.

"I'm working on biological clocks, the timing systems animals have inside them and how this physiological process is disrupted, for example, by traveling across time zones or working on different shifts," Menaker said.

Menaker has been observing how Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is influenced by the state of the circadian system.

People suffering from SAD have an irregular circadian system, Menaker said. For example, when people consistently wake up too early in the morning and their sleep cycle is disturbed, it means their circadian system is advanced, and it is functioning earlier than it should be, Menaker explained.

"We think that there are naturally occurring, genetic predispositions to various psychological problems," Menaker said.

Some of the hamsters that were stolen had spontaneous mutations that had occurred during breeding and were discovered by chance, Menaker said.

"These hamsters mimicked the human SAD condition — they woke up early, and they did not respond to light," Menaker said.

When these animals were crossed with normal animals, their offspring demonstrated a singular gene that caused the irregularity, he said.

"The dominant gene was

Studies delayed but will continue with new animals

seen in both sexes, and we were hoping to study it as a model system for SAD," Menaker said.

"With this single gene, it would have been easy, or at least possible, to understand what caused (SAD)," Menaker said.

The work on the hamsters was just starting because a pure line of the animals had only recently been obtained, Menaker said. The research was aimed at observing these hamsters and learning what was different with that particular strain, he said.

The Animal Liberation Front said in a letter delivered to several area newspapers Monday morning that one reason for the break-in was to protest experiments being conducted by Dr. Barbara Gordon-Lickey.

Gordon-Lickey is concerned that the media is playing into the hands of the ALF, she said, and she refused to talk about her involvement in the experiments. But Ethan Allen, her research assistant, spoke on her behalf.

Gordon-Lickey has been researching the nervous system, especially the visual system, for about 15 years, Allen said.

"In the past five years, her research has become more neuro-chemical; before that, it was physiological," Allen said.

"What we are studying is the phenomena of neuromal-plasticity, which is a very basic phenomena in in many vertebrates' nervous systems," Allen said. "Plasticity refers to the ability of a nervous system to make a fundamental change in its output for a given set of inputs; it relates to a wide array of everyday activity."

Allen believes that an understanding of the function of plasticity would be extremely valuable, both clinically and therapeutically, he said.

"Currently there is practically nothing that anyone can do for someone who has suffered brain trauma. If they have been hit heavily on the head or have had a stroke, and certain parts

of their brain are shut off, those parts can never be regained," Allen said.

"If we can understand what the neurological mechanism is, and what the biochemistry is to turn plasticity back on, then there may be a possibility of dealing with such problems," he said.

Neuromal-plasticity can be most widely expressed in young animals, Allen said, a phenomena similar to Conrad Lawrence's work on imprinting, or teaching animals certain things at a certain age.

"While certain forms of learning occur throughout life, others are confined to certain ages," Allen said.

This research, however, cannot be done without using actual animals; graphs and computers are useful, but they do not do the job effectively, Allen said. The research Gordon-Lickey and Allen were working on involves experiments on kittens between the ages of four and eight weeks of age.

"The fact is that you cannot study how nervous systems are organized without studying organized nervous systems," Allen said. "We are admittedly working on a very small piece of a very big puzzle, but that is the only way anyone is ever going to make any progress."

The research was not directly harmed by the Sunday raid, Allen said. The research will be held up for a few months, however, because of the fact that the breeding colony of cats was stolen and because of the damaged equipment.

The main outcome of Sunday's break-in is "the taxpayers will just end up having to pay more money," Allen said.

Tom Stevens, assistant professor of chemistry, and his research group lost four rabbits in the raid. The rabbits were being used as blood donors for research being done in Steven's field of cellular biology.

"We don't experiment on the rabbits," Stevens said. "What we use (the rabbits) for is as donors of blood; we use their serum, and every three weeks we get a donation of a very small volume of blood."

Prior to having blood drawn,

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