

Animal research sparks debate

A forum Monday questioned the validity of experiments on animals

By G. Jaros
Oregon Daily Emerald

It's not easy to have a discussion about experimenting on animals — emotions run high, tempers flare and opinions are often firmly set.

Animals are kept in laboratories in the basement of Heustis Hall. Approximately 34,000 animals are used for experimental research in University labs, according to the University's August 1998 U.S. Department of Agriculture and Public Health Service Semiannual Report on Animal Care Facilities and Programs.

Of those, nearly 33,000 are zebrafish. The remainder of animals include frogs, newts, mice, rats, rabbits, owls and monkeys. Other animals have been experimented on at one time or another, including chickens and kittens.

Researchers who use animals in experiments say it is necessary for science while Students for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (SETA) say it is torture. They claim there are other ways of finding the same information without experimenting on animals, but researchers say that day has not arrived.

SETA organized and held a forum on Monday in hopes of having a public dialogue to discuss animal research. They invited University researchers and Javier Burgos, president and founder of the The Nature of Wellness. He gave a presentation called, "Why Animal Research is Scientific Fraud."

University researchers decided not to take an active part in the discussion, although several were in attendance.

"If you pick persons out and point them out as an example of something bad, they are going to be defensive," said Zoltan Varga, a zebrafish researcher who attended the forum.

Varga said that he and other re-

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Zoltan Varga
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searchers have discussed having a public debate about the use of animals for biomedical research, but he isn't sure what form that might take. He suggested that a debate, in the form of a weekly column in the pages of the Emerald, might be one way to do that.

Chelsea Lincoln, former head of SETA, began the forum by questioning the scientific validity of using rhesus monkeys and kittens in experiments. Burgos then spoke for more than two hours before fielding questions from the audience.

"Animal research is nothing but a mental disease," Burgos said. "Hundreds of millions of people are taught the mental disease that is the belief that animal research saves human lives."

Burgos said that animal research is "the biggest fraud ever perpetrated" and that it is perpetrated by trillion-dollar drug companies who must test their products on something so that they can get FDA approval and make more money. He added that no disease has ever been cured during the 20th century using "animal model" research.

"If the same research being done on animals was done on humans through clinical testing of cell cultures, 90 percent of drugs would never reach the market because they either cause human deaths or terrible side effects," Burgos said.

But Varga doesn't see it that way. He said diseases will be solved and cured with the help of animal research but in a longer time span than just one human lifetime.

"Each researcher finds a piece of a puzzle," Varga said. "And later, another researcher may come along and put those pieces together. These little pieces they are finding may later help find cures for animals and humans."

Student John Condie is in favor of animal research. His father has multiple sclerosis, his sister has systemic lupus and the list goes on.

"I come from a family with a screwed-up gene pool," said Condie, a senior in biochemistry. "The only reason I have these relatives with me is because the drugs that are improving and sustaining their lives were developed through animal testing. So for me it's just a matter of priorities."

Amber Brandt, a junior in biology and anthropology, doesn't think experimenting on animals is necessary.

"I think with all the technology available they could find other ways to do it — human skin grafts or something," Brandt said. "I have a friend whose mother would not be here if it were not for animal testing, but I still disagree with it. I just don't think we should use animals for that kind of stuff."

After the forum, Varga talked with Burgos about his presentation.

"I agreed with some things you said and disagreed with others," Varga said.

Burgos replied, "Some things are black and white. You can't agree with some things I said and disagree with others — not the underlying premise."

Varga told Burgos that life wasn't black and white, it was also gray. Burgos agreed that life has gray areas, but he said experimenting on animals isn't one of those areas.

In the end, they agreed to disagree.

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