

## **Being Open about Animal Research: the University makes a Declaration**

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An Ipsos Mori poll last October suggested that public support in Britain for the use of animals in medical research had significantly declined during the previous two years. In prompt response to this news, a group of drugs companies, medical charities, science-promotional organisations, and universities, including Oxford, issued a statement entitled ‘Declaration on Openness on Animal Research’. Here is a summary of it. We need medical research, and some of that research depends on animal models. The laity has hitherto accepted and trusted in that research, but this confidence should not be taken for granted; it should be actively courted. And therefore “We, the undersigned, commit to work together to establish a Concordat that will develop principles of openness, practical steps and measurable objectives which will underpin a more transparent approach to animal research”.<sup>1</sup>

This is evidently a public-relations performance first of all, and it’s hard to assess what more there might be to it, whether it really does represent in any substantial way “the scientific community embracing an open approach”. The Declaration itself, as made available on the internet, is very slight (just over 200 words long). Most of the page is taken up by the forty or so logos of the “undersigned”, which with their clamorous colouring and fancy type-faces look like an assortment of sweets. And in fact the logo-designer’s habit of mind – arranging motifs into a persuasive front – is there in the Declaration too (how else could that solemnly absurd term “Concordat” have got in?).

The ‘reluctance’ motif, for instance: “When we need to use animals, we strive to reduce the number needed”. Put in that way, it sounds like a voluntary kindness, whereas in fact this strife is required of researchers by the 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act. Perhaps that’s what the authors of the Declaration mean a little later when they politely concede that, in the making of ethical conditions for animal research in Britain, “Public scrutiny has also played an essential role”. If so, it’s a curiously oblique and misleading way to make the point. The ordinary public has no opportunity to get a sight of, let alone scrutinise, anything except abstracts and statistics. Any scrutiny properly so-called is carried out for the public by the Home Secretary, acting through inspectors and committees appointed under the 1986 Act. In short, the scrutiny is a professional business rather than a public one: a much more manageable sort of attention than the one implied in the Declaration, and one which does indeed appear to have been well managed in that sense.<sup>2</sup> So not mentioning the Act here, and making the

“scrutiny” sound as if it’s part of an improvised and rather creditable relationship with the general public, has more design in it than candour.

Then there is the ‘dialogue’ motif, another familiar feature of the public relations of animal research. We are told that there should be “an ongoing conversation about why and how animals are used in research and the benefits of this”. But what sign is there of the etymological ‘con’, the other voice, in the proposed discourse? It seems only to imply more of the same from front-organisations like Understanding Animal Research (one of the signatories, of course). In fact the suggested contents of that ongoing conversation are very much the same as UAR’s institutional mission.<sup>3</sup> Certainly lay-people should be told more about what is happening to animals in laboratories and why. But so also should the scientists who do that work hear more from the people who don’t, people who contemplate such things without the professional usage which in any line of work can wear away sensibility, and which in animal research has indeed permitted some notorious cruelties. The Home Office has recognised as much in its advice since 1986, and has encouraged institutions to involve such people. The 1986 Act has in fact just been amended; it came into effect in its revised form at the start of 2013, and the guidance to the new law provided by the Home Office renews this same advice. In so far as it’s a matter of numbers and affiliations on committees, such lay involvement is not hard to measure. If the “measurable objectives” developed by the Concordat don’t include it, then we shall be bound to conclude that “conversation” is indeed a word misused to mean more and better PR.

As for Oxford University, its logo sits discreetly near the bottom right of the declarative company, but the University’s past and present prominence in animal experimentation, quite apart from its academic distinction, make it really the most significant of them all, the one whose practical steps will be most worth watching. When it appointed in 1882 its first professor of Physiology, the “high priest of vivisection” John Scott Burdon Sanderson, the University inherited and very reluctantly staged the first national crisis of conscience on this subject (see *Oxford Magazine* nos 262 and 276). More recently, as we all have cause to know, it weathered a second of the same. But there is this notable difference between the two occasions: for various social and professional reasons there was much more freedom of thought and speech, or at least preparedness to use them, in the Oxford of the 1880s than there seems to be now. Consequently the whole University rose to the seriousness of the occasion, in a way not seen at all the second time round.

But perhaps the official University really is thinking differently these days, feeling more ready to engage with dissenting interests, and accordingly signing the Declaration in earnest good faith. One test of that might be the University website. At [www.ox.ac.uk/animal\\_research](http://www.ox.ac.uk/animal_research), it offers the equivalent of a tour of the new Biomedical Sciences Building in South Parks Road. (The place itself, with no visible windows or doors, is a built abjuration of openness.) These web-pages were last updated in November of 2011, so they can’t be expected to show any of the very latest plain dealing, but they do seem well-presented, clear and

informative. The number of animals in the building, for instance, is stated: about 16,000 (mostly rodents) at any one time. Particular research projects are described. But although there is this detail, the thinking and the tactics are very similar to the Declaration's. The text acknowledges ethical concerns in a general way, but sets them against details of the University's valuable work on life-threatening or disabling conditions and diseases (all the specified research touches on these at some point), and insists on its high (in fact "gold") standards of animal welfare. We aren't told what other sorts of research which uses animals there might be: research aimed at curing less serious conditions, or simply at finding out something that will "increase understanding of normal biological functions" – as the Declaration defines it, letting the last and littlest projects through.

In short, this is indeed not yet openness, if the word implies a disinterested readiness with all-round information. Consider that number 16,000, for instance, which comes out during a Q&A series:

*You say primates account for under 0.5% of animals, so that means you have at least 16,000 animals in the Biomedical Sciences Building in total – is that right?*

*Numbers change daily so we cannot give a fixed figure, but it is in that order.*

There is a sub-dramatic suggestion of keen enquiry here, and of information reluctantly yielded. You feel you're getting somewhere. But what does that figure mean? It's really just a measure of the capacity of the building to hold animals. The crucial figure – the rate of turnover of the animals – is hinted at in a rather grim euphemism, "Numbers change daily", but is not supplied. So I shall give it here: it's about ten times 16,000 a year.<sup>4</sup> The turnover, then, is one complete building's worth every five or six weeks. Even this astonishing number does not include the animals bred but found unsuited or surplus to need, and accordingly killed unrecorded. If I've got anything wrong here, I invite informed sources in the University to correct me. Better still, embrace that open approach, Oxford! Revise the web-site and put *all* the pertinent numbers and their explanations onto it, and *all* the topics of research, with their animal-related implications! That'll make the conversation, when it starts going on, much more intelligent and useful.

Meanwhile, the number of animal experiments in the U.K. steadily rises. There were 3.79 million last year, an increase of 2% on 2010, of 8% on 2000 (that is, if the gruesome process of breeding GM animals is not counted: 40% if it is): so much for all that strife to reduce the number needed! The increase has been happening almost exclusively in the universities: commercial organisations recorded about the same number of animals in 2011 as they did in 2000, though even this good sign is misleading.<sup>5</sup> In short, the promise implicit in the 1986 Act – that the use of animals in science would be progressively reduced, with a goal in mind of none at all – has been broken. One of its chief devisers, Professor Michael Balls, expressly recognised as much in a talk which he recently gave in Oxford.<sup>6</sup>

The Act, as I have said, was amended at the start of the year; though not much changed, it has at any rate been given a renewed lease of life, an opportunity to redeem that promise after all. And at this crucial time, the institutions which largely decided the Act's former fortunes, and which would no doubt like to control its future, have come forward with a promise of their own in the form of this Declaration. Exactly what sort of promise theirs is we cannot tell, mainly because they themselves didn't yet know at the time of making it. But they've had some weeks to think about it since then, so perhaps this is the time and place to say more. Someone in this co-signatory University must know what there is to be known, and where better to tell us about it than in an open space like the *Oxford Magazine*? That would be a real earnest of visibility, almost a practical step, and therefore a helpful indication of what the Concordat is likely to be worth, at Oxford and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> <http://amrcpolicyblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/declaration-on-openness-2012.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Dan Lyons, 'Protecting Animals versus the Pursuit of Knowledge: the Evolution of the British Animal Research Policy Process', in *Society and Animals* 19 (2011), 356-67.

<sup>3</sup> As described, for instance, at [www.ox.ac.uk/animal\\_research/further\\_information/index.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/animal_research/further_information/index.html)

<sup>4</sup> 160,042 in 2010 and 156,215 in 2011: figures provided by the University in reply to a Freedom of Information request.

<sup>5</sup> The statistics certainly understate the commercial use of animals, since some experimentation is being commissioned abroad. See *Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain 2011*, London: The Stationery Office, July 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.vero.org.uk/previous.asp?sem+9](http://www.vero.org.uk/previous.asp?sem+9)