

Voice of Pro-Test

Confidence is rising among scientists defending animal research. It should be encouraged.

The name Pro-Test is becoming a rallying point for scientists standing up to animal-rights extremists. The term was coined by 16-year-old British school pupil Laurie Pycroft in January 2006, when he stumbled across an animal-rights demonstration in Oxford. The activists were protesting against the construction of a university biomedical building with modern animal facilities. Their violent strategies, including the placing of bombs, had already forced some building contractors to pull out. Important research was being hampered, thought Pycroft. He sprang into action, creating the first Pro-Test committee with university students and teachers, and organizing a rally to coincide with the activists' next demonstration the following month.

In what was probably the first mass public showing in defence of animal research, about 1,000 scientists and students attended, overshadowing the 200-odd animal-rights protestors. That was a tipping point in Britain. Although the country had some of the world's strictest animal-experimentation regulations, its scientists felt at risk from militant antivivisectionists. Most kept their heads below the parapet. But under the Pro-Test banner, they lost their fear of speaking out, particularly after politicians including then-prime minister Tony Blair showed support for their cause. The Oxford facility eventually got built.

Fast forward six years, to Italy. Last July, activists broke into the Green Hill beagle-breeding facility near Brescia, claiming that the animals, many of which were used for mandatory toxicity testing of drugs, were treated cruelly. Police allowed the activists to take the dogs away and a court later said that they could keep custody of the animals, pending investigations. Italy's legal system being notoriously slow, the facility remains shut. Last week, most of the staff were laid off.

Concerned that the police and courts seemed to condone the methods

of the animal activists — and that scientists had no safe platform to explain their animal research — a group of Italian scientists created Pro-Test Italia in September. Just in time, as it unhappily turned out: on 20 April, the same activists (by now calling themselves Fermare Green Hill, or Stop Green Hill), broke into an animal facility at the University of Milan, chaining themselves by the necks to the doors and refusing to leave without the animals, mostly mice. Twelve hours later, after tense negotiations, they left with some of the animals — and with police assurance that they could come back for the rest. Before leaving, the activists mixed up the animals and cage labels to sabotage ongoing experiments.

The next day, scores of scientists and students demonstrated in the streets under the Pro-Test Italia banner. A major pro-research demonstration is planned in Milan's city centre on 1 June. The university has refused to let the activists come back, and is preparing to bring charges. Scientists there — from students to the rector — have signed open letters condemning the animal-rights activists' actions and explaining why medical research using animals is important.

The Basel Declaration Society, created in 2010 to encourage scientists to talk openly about their work using animals, has rallied heartening international support for the Milanese scientists. By 7 May, more than 4,000 researchers around the globe had signed its call for solidarity, posted just one week earlier. The call also demands fairer media coverage of research using animals, and zero tolerance from police and policy-makers towards acts of animal-rights extremism.

The use of animal experiments to further medical advances is a delicate issue, and there is no place in the debate for violence. There is, however, a need for scientists to talk openly, and it is encouraging to see their new confidence. Pro-Test Italia is actually the third franchise using Pycroft's term. Pro-Test for Science was set up at the University of California, Los Angeles, four years ago after attacks on researchers. Meanwhile, UK Pro-Test ended operations in 2011, content that it had

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achieved its aim of giving a voice to researchers. It had shown that when it comes to resolving ethical tensions between animal research and medical and veterinary health, we need more scientists prepared to Pro-Test against activist violence. ■