

change

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TRACKING TRENDS ABOUT TO HIT YOU, EVERY WEEK

WILL SNIFFY SAVE HIS BROTHERS?

With the price of laboratory animals rising and animal activists building up pressure, India's pharmacy colleges are cutting down on specimen numbers and turning to virtual teaching tools like Sniffy. Are we on our way to a more humane educational system, and can dissecting a digi frog rival the real slicing-up, asks YOLANDE D'MELLO



ON February 19, Dr RC Deka, Director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi's premier medical college and hospital, received a letter from a woman most men would kill to correspond with.

But it wasn't a happy exchange.

In her letter, Baywatch bombshell Pamela Anderson requested Dr Deka to free ageing monkeys and rabbits with skin infections used for laboratory testing at the AIIMS Central Animal Facility, to sanctuaries.

An activist with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Anderson's letter was one of many posted by PETA India activists and supporters since 2009 to universities all over the country, appealing for an end to animal experiments.

Nine universities including Annamalai University, Solapur University, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University, Pondicherry University, and Manipal University have agreed, finding alternative techniques to animal lab testing.

Demonstrations by PETA outside AIIMS, including the most recent one organised last week by activists wearing money masks and orange prison suits, followed an exposé by a national daily that acquired video footage of the psychological trauma caused by life in a lab cage.

A monkey was seen climbing the walls of the cage repeatedly, while another was taunted by a lab worker who pretended to kick the cage.

Anderson says "it broke my heart" to hear that one monkey had been suffering at the facility for almost 20 years.

Poorva Joshipura, chief functionary, PETA India says, "Following pressure from PETA, we learned that the Medical Council of India has withdrawn its requirement that every medical school in India must maintain an animal house and use animals as teaching models. They have recommended that schools adopt computer-assisted models to replace animals."

The government, which already has considerable acts in place to protect the rights of animals, has proposed the Animal Welfare Act, 2011 which suggests the setting up of a Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA) to prevent persons or institutions from performing experiments on animals.

The ministry has invited comments on the draft legislation, which will replace the existing Prevention of Cruelty

to Animals Act 1960, by March 20.

Will it compromise our learning?

So, while the lab rat may be spared the pain, will humane teaching methods affect learning? Shantanu Iyer, a final year student of Bachelor of Pharmaceutical Science at MET Institute of Pharmacy in Bandra says, "As part of our fourth year experiment for the Assay test that allows us to measure the concentration of a drug in the muscle periodically after injection, we use guinea pigs." While Iyer's syllabus mentions an alternative method of learning the ropes of this experiment through video format, he says it's not the same. "It restricts you to theoretical knowledge. We are 'sacrificing' the animal for the good of science. And this is the most effective way to acquire a clear understanding of the subject."

A student from AIIMS, who



VIDEO FORMAT EXPERIMENTS RESTRICT YOU TO THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE. WE ARE 'SACRIFICING' THE ANIMAL FOR THE GOOD OF SCIENCE. AND THIS IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO ACQUIRE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBJECT.

SHANTANU IYER

Final year student of Bachelor of Pharmaceutical Science at MET Institute of Pharmacy, Bandra, on the limitations of alternative methods to animal testing

LAB ANIMAL PRICE LIST

Wearing Mouse: Rs 45
Rabbit: Rs 1,540
Guinea pig: Rs 440
Hamster: Rs 120

At: National Centre For Laboratory Animal Sciences in Hyderabad

did not wish to be named, agrees. "In our labs, we are working for the welfare of humankind. None of the experiments can be performed directly on humans. We must test them on animals to check whether life form will respond to specific drugs or not."

But their professors are keen to see the ethical side. Principal, MET Institute of Pharmacy, Dr Abha Doshi believes in using animals only if absolutely necessary. "Third and fourth year students of the Bachelor of Pharmacy course use guinea pigs for experiments. For students who wish to pursue an MPharm degree, this experience is imperative. But for diploma students, it's not essential, which is why we discontinued the use of animals for them."

Doshi shares that the college has received PETA's request but banning animal testing is impractical.

There is an effort however, to keep the numbers under control. To cut costs, MET procures its guinea pigs from The Haffkine Institute for Training, Research and Testing in Parel, and internal organs of chicken from local slaughter houses. "There is a scarcity of frogs, and prices are high. While earlier, every student was provided with a frog, now, one specimen is shared by two students. Two guinea pigs are shared between 15 students. A lot of it has to do with raised costs of laboratory animals but the education system is also considerably more sensitive to animal rights than it was," says Doshi.

Dr Y K Gupta, Head of Department, Pharmacology, and PRO for AIIMS, says they have made attempts to reduce the number of animals used in experiments by resorting to statistical methods. "And while alternative methods like Cell Culture can be considered, they cannot offer a complete replacement for animal experiments. We, as scientists, love animals and understand the sacrifice they make for the betterment of human life. We follow the Principle of Four 'R's' — Replacement, Refinement, Rehabilitation and Reduction — to safeguard their rights," he clarifies.

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