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 digital frog rival the real slicing-up, asks YOLANDE D’MELLO

On February 19, Dr RC Deba, a member of the AIBMS, India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, a premier medical college and hospital, received a letter from a woman who was a friend to correspond with.

But it wasn’t a happy exchange.

In her letter, Baywatch enthusiast Pamela Anderson requested Dr Deba to rescind his policy of using monkeys and rabbits with skin infections 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 universit, yappealing for an end to animal experiments.

Other universities including Annamalai University, Solarpur University, Hensawat Madan Malaviya University, Pondicherry University, and Manipal University have agreed, finding alternative techniques to animal lab testing.


The government, which already has considerable powers 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 (PCCSA) to prevent persons or institutions from performing experiments on animals.

The ministry has invited comments on 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 MIT 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 did not wish to be named, agreed. “In our lab, we are working for the welfare of mankind. None of the experiments can be performed directly on humans. We must test them on animals to check whether life forms will respond to specific drugs or not.”

But their professors are keen to see the ethical side. Principal, MIT Institute of Pharmacy, Dr Abha Doshi, says. “Although there is no statutory requirement, it is absolutely necessary. Third and fourth year students of the Bachelor of Pharmacy course use guinea pigs for experiments. For students who wish to go on to an MPharm degree, this experience is imperative. But for diploma students, it’s not crucial, 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, MIT procures its guinea pigs from The Hallmark Institute for Training, Research and Testing in Patel, 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 the Department, Pharmacology, and PDR 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, Reduction and Education — to safeguard their rights,” he clarifies.

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