



NEWS RELEASE

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For immediate release

Newcastle University in desperate attempt to avoid disclosing details on monkey research

The BUAV has lodged an appeal with the Information Tribunal following last-ditch moves by Newcastle University to avoid releasing information about primate research, under freedom of information legislation. The university has made the extraordinary claim that its animal researchers do not need to have their official licence available when experimenting on animals.

Project licences, issued by the Home Office under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA), are long and highly technical documents, setting out precisely what can be done to animals, what steps must be taken to keep suffering down, when animals can be re-used, when they must be killed and so forth. It is a criminal offence to carry out unauthorised experiments.

Newcastle University initially admitted that it did have the two licences in question but later claimed to the Information Commissioner that it did not, despite sending him copies of them! The university's argument was that only the official vet, an university employee, had access to the licences, and that the researchers themselves did not need to; nor, it seems, did the senior employee with overall responsibility for animal experiments there or the animal care officer with day-to-day responsibility for the animals. In effect, the university is trying to wash its hands of responsibility for animal experiments carried out on its premises, by its employees.

The Commissioner accepted that the university did not have the licences and therefore rejected the BUAV's complaint.

The research on macaques involved implanting electrodes into the monkeys' brains in order to record the activity of brain nerve cells in awake monkeys, who are forcibly restrained while being made to watch images on TV screens.

The experiments are particularly contentious not only because they involve primates, are highly invasive and long term (the monkeys are reused sometimes for years), but they can be replaced by human volunteer studies using non-invasive imaging machines such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines.

The intention of the BUAV in submitting a FOI request was to discover why such experiments were allowed in the first place because apparently similar experiments by the same researcher have been recently banned for ethical reasons by the Berlin authorities in Germany.

Michelle Thew, BUAV chief executive, said: *'The Home Office would be very interested to learn of the cavalier attitude which Newcastle University takes to its legal responsibilities for the animals in its laboratory. How can it make sure that everything is done properly if the researchers and other key employees do not have the licences? We suspect this is a desperate attempt by the university to hide from the public what goes on behind its four walls'.*

For further information please contact Sarah Kite at sarah.kite@buav.org or Tel +44 (0) 207 700 4888
www.buav.org

Notes

1. The Commissioner's decision will shortly be available on his website but in the meantime can be obtained from the BUAV
2. In paragraph 22 of the decision, the Commissioner says: *'The University explained that it was not necessary for a project licence holder to hold a copy of a project licence in order to conduct work under a licence'.*
3. One of the licences had expired by the time of the BUAV request, in June 2008. The other was active though it has since expired. But this is not why Newcastle says it does not have them. Its arguments would apply equally to current licences