



Media release

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Information Commission orders universities to release animal experiments information in landmark ruling

Some of the UK's most respected universities have refused to disclose key information to animal rights organization, BUAV.

The Information Commission has ordered Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, King's College London, Manchester and Nottingham to release information about their animal experimentation, which had been previously refused.

Michelle Thew, BUAV chief executive, said: "This is an historic ruling. Animal researchers always 'talk the talk' about wishing to be more open about their work, and yet when faced with requests for basic information many do everything in their power to resist.

"Risk to personal safety, though real in isolated cases in the past, is hugely exaggerated and often used as a smokescreen when researchers are not upfront with the public.

"The smoke has now been blown away by the Commissioner. The public have the right to know what is done to animals in laboratories, often with their money, so that they can make up their own minds about whether they find it acceptable."

In July 2006, the BUAV asked a number of universities to disclose, under the Freedom of Information Act, the number of primates they had used in experiments in two particular years and for a summary of their current primate research. Universities are public authorities for the purpose of the Act.

They argued that disclosing the information would be likely to endanger the safety of the researchers and others. Oxford and King's also argued that disclosure would prejudice their commercial interests, claiming that sponsors would be less likely to give them money.

After a thorough investigation, the Commissioner has now rejected the universities' arguments and that the researchers face very little risk of attack.

The Commissioner was particularly influenced by the fact that researchers at each of the universities had published articles about their primate work. Oxford researchers, for example, had published 82 articles since 2001, and Cambridge researchers 34.

Any risk to personal safety had therefore been voluntarily assumed by the researchers themselves and would not be increased by disclosing the information requested by the BUAV.

Similarly, the Commissioner ruled that Oxford and King's had failed to show that their commercial interests would be prejudiced in any way by disclosing the requested information.

ENDS

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Notes

1. The years for which the requested statistical information related were 2004 and 2005
2. During the proceedings against Oxford, the university voluntarily gave summaries of their current primate research. The Commissioner decided that the summaries were adequate.
3. Following the BUAV request, Newcastle and St Andrew's Universities supplied the requested information, and Bristol, Cardiff, Hull, Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan, Royal Holloway and Edinburgh said they did not hold it, indicating they did not then conduct primate experiments. Following the BUAV complaint to the Commissioner, Nottingham gave the statistical information required and said they no longer conducted primate research.
4. In an earlier FoI Act case brought by the BUAV, the Information Tribunal damningly described as 'positive spin' summaries (of animal experiment licence applications) written by the five researchers in question for publication by the Home Office, with little said about what was to happen to the animals. This provides another example of animal researchers seeking to control what the public is told about their work
5. The European directive on animal experiments (Directive 86/609) is currently being revised. Researchers are mounting a strong rearguard action to limit the information they will have to make public.