OUTLOOK india.com

Web | Jan 09, 2003

Let's Stop Monkeying Around

The dismissal of Maneka Gandhi is an opportunity to restructure the CPCSEA, making it more responsive to the scientific community itself rather than allowing to be waylaid by animal rights activists.

M.V. RAMANA

Late last month Maneka Gandhi was removed from the position as chairperson of the Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA), albeit on relatively flimsy grounds. This had been on the cards for sometime now with major conflicts between the Health Ministry and Ms. Gandhi, requiring the intervention of Prime Minister Vajpayee himself. Over the last few years, Ms. Gandhi's autocratic ways and, more important, her providing cover to animal rights activists, had seriously disrupted medical and scientific research involving animal experimentation in many major institutions. Ms. Gandhi's removal therefore is to be welcomed.

The CPCSEA was set up in early sixties to look into the issue of animal experimentation in the country and brought out guidelines in 1968 to regulate animal experimentation. Unfortunately, these guidelines were not implemented. In the late nineties Ms. Gandhi, who already had a reputation as being an animal rights crusader, became the chairman of the CPCSEA and rapidly changed rules to regulate experimentation on animals.

Many of these rules, however, could simply not be followed on practical and/or theoretical grounds and were widely criticized by the scientific community as unnecessary red tape. The new rules also required the inclusion of "a non-scientific socially aware member" on institutional animal ethics committees, thereby creating openings for animal rights activists. As Camellia Satija, founder trustee of KARE (Kindness to Animals and Respect for Environment) and a former CPCSEA nominee, admitted in the *Times of India*, "It makes a lot of difference if there is someone in power to back you up." Armed with this official sanction, animal rights activists conducted a series of controversial inspections on scientific institutions.

One prominent case occurred in August 1999 when dozens of monkeys from the Hyderabad based National Institute of Nutrition were forcibly released into the forest. The action held up the tests of the "alpha-interferon" drug that were being carried out on the monkeys by a private company - Shantha Biotech. When the company appealed to the Andhra Pradesh High Court, the court directed the CPCSEA not to interfere with the tests. But the damage had been done. Quite apart from the time and money lost, the released monkeys themselves would have been unable to survive in the wild, having been acclimatized to a laboratory diet.

The most recent case was at the National Institute of Immunology (NII), a leading scientific research centre in Delhi. The CPCSEA inspection team charged that animals at the NII facility were under-fed and that nearly 90% of the monkeys were infected with tuberculosis (TB). CPCSEA then recommended that the NII licence to experiment on primates be cancelled. This would essentially halt much of the scientific work carried out in the institute. NII had to obtain an interim stay order from the Delhi High Court.

CPCSEA's accusations were soon shown to be baseless by the Delhi Science Forum, an independent group. Their inspection discovered that the monkeys were being fed adequate diets and that only 2 out of the 207 monkeys had tuberculosis. It turned out that the CPCSEA team, not being well-versed with the procedures followed at the NII animal facility, had assumed that animals with crosses in their records - indicating that they had not been tested for tuberculosis, which is common with infant monkeys - were suffering from TB (which were denoted by plus signs).

This could be laughed off as an error but for the "wastage of public funds and credibility of both NII and CPCSEA". In its conversations with the CPCSEA inspection team, the DSF group detected "significant bias... against use of animals in scientific research, pre-conceived notions and pre-determined conclusions about harm being done to animals."

Such notions put a short-term notion of animal welfare above long-term betterment of both humans and animals. They ignore the crucial role played by animal testing in advancing scientific understanding of the human body and disease treatment. For example, much of our understanding of how radiation affects humans comes from experiments involving animals. Though vital, epidemiological studies on the survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as workers at nuclear facilities, are not controlled experiments.

Animal experiments are necessary to understand what would happen in situations with no prior experience - for instance, inhaling a large quantity of plutonium. More familiar examples are those required for the testing of vaccines or drugs. Animal rights activists also ignore the benefits accruing to animals themselves from experiments involving animals; they are also treated with vaccines and drugs.

Animal rights activists are fond of pointing out that there are differences between animals and humans, and extrapolation does not make medical sense. While differences between animals and humans are patently obvious, this does not imply that they do not share commonalties as well. Where there is overlap it makes sense to extrapolate the results of animal testing to human beings, not blindly but with caution and due evaluation. While trans-species extrapolation may not work in some cases, and there may be some unfortunate consequences, there is little doubt that the number of lives saved vastly exceed that of those lost.

The vast majority of medical scientists clearly think that animal experimentation is required. Even in the U.K., with its militant animal rights groups, the Chief Executive of the British Medical Research Council recently stated: "The MRC believes that animal research is essential to tackling major 21st century health problems such as cancer and heart disease. Without the use of animals it would be impossible, in many cases, to develop drugs or any sort of medical treatment."

Ms. Gandhi also tried to justify her actions by claiming that her aim was to improve science, reportedly stating "Nearly Rs. 22,000 crores has been spent since Independence on medical and bio-science research. Yet, we are still to patent anything worthwhile". Science, being a very open ended process, unfortunately doesn't work in this linear fashion. There are no guarantees of immediate gains or a promise of returns proportional to investment. That said, it is clear by most yardsticks that the Indian scientific community hasn't produced as much as it could. But tracing the problem to poor treatment of animals makes little sense. If that were to be the case, every other branch of science except for the life sciences - physics, geology, etc. - should be flourishing. They are not. If the diagnosis is bad, the cure is worse. Requiring professors to waste time on paperwork would only make them more unproductive.

Scientists themselves are not averse to good animal care practices, not in the least because poor specimens might produce shoddy results. But being regulated by animal rights activists is akin to having a set of vegetarian or vegan crusaders oversee the state of slaughterhouses. Clearly their primary interest would be to shut them down rather than to have them be run in a clean and hygienic manner. Supervisory authorities should not have agendas inimical to the activity being supervised. The dismissal of Maneka Gandhi should therefore be used as an opportunity to restructure the CPCSEA, making it more responsive to the scientific community itself rather than allowing to be waylaid by animal rights activists.

The author is currently at the Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University.