



RAPID RESPONSE BY
LABORATORY ANIMAL RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNED

► MARCH 9-10, 2021

A Virtual Workshop

The National Academies of

SCIENCES
ENGINEERING
MEDICINE



PUBLIC MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT ANIMAL-BASED RESEARCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

James O'Reilly, President
Massachusetts Society for Medical Research (MSMR)
March 10, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Jim O'Reilly, President

Massachusetts Society for Medical Research (MSMR)

MSMR was founded in 1953, making it the oldest non-profit organization in the country serving the biomedical research industry. Members include research hospitals, institutes, colleges and universities, biotechnology and pharmaceutical firms, professional associations and vendors from throughout New England and New York.

Among his duties, Mr. O'Reilly tracks public policy and works to educate policymakers on issues of importance to the medical research community. He also counsels members on issues related to animal activism, crisis communications and security.

He has more than 20 years of experience in non-profit association management. Prior to joining MSMR in June 2017 he worked for a number of organizations in the areas of public policy, outreach and communications. He began his career as a newspaper reporter and editor after graduating from the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. with a bachelor of arts in political science.



THE BACKGROUND

On October 29, 2020, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) conducted an online town hall meeting. PETA President Ingrid Newkirk, and Senior VP Kathy Guillermo were among the speakers.

They targeted the National Institutes of Health (NIH), asserting the NIH funds “bad science,” and condemning universities for reducing the populations of animals at its research facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also noted PETA’s current **campaign reaching out to state auditors**, claiming investigations were taking place.

The online town hall concluded with a Q&A, during which Newkirk notably **encouraged listeners to contact researchers** at facilities. Specifically, Newkirk encouraged listeners to look up researchers home addresses and send the letters there directly.



WHAT LED UP TO THAT POINT?

- Animal rights activism during the COVID-19 outbreak
 - Through January and early February, PETA news releases marked business-as-usual approach re: animal research
 - As pandemic unfolded, activists was noticeably silent re: animal research
 - Almost two months after first U.S. case reported, PETA issued first release mid-March re: COVID-19 and institutions using research animals
 - Call out several colleges/universities for “reducing population numbers”
 - Cite institutional directives as proof “...cures will only come with human-relevant, non-animal research methods.”
 - Since, PETA has issued some 200+ press releases attacking research institutions
 - Form letters, consistent language, released to media
 - Also call on fellow activists to post negative messages on institutions’ social media
 - Have also pushed for state/federal investigations into publicly-funded research institutions



Animal-Killing Spree in Labs as Universities Close Over COVID-19 Fears—PETA Calls B.S.

Share

Tweet

- Universities have issued guidance to identify “critical animals to be maintained,” start “reducing population numbers [of animals],” and “[i]dentify any research experiments that can be ramped down, curtailed, or delayed”
- The National Institutes of Health wastes nearly \$18 billion in taxpayer money annually on cruel and useless experiments on animals, many of whom will be deemed “extraneous”
- PETA is urging all universities to suspend and assess animal experiments and instead use more effective, ethical, and economical human-relevant methods



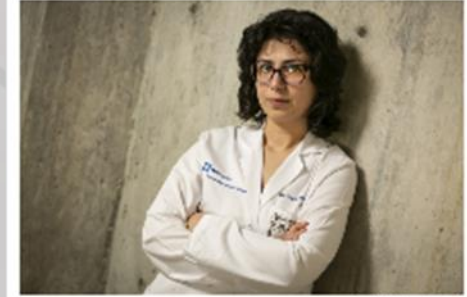
WHAT CHANGED?

- It's likely that activists sensed early on that most people supported scientific research as solution to the global health threat of our lifetimes
- However...
 - Research staff begin posting on **social media** of their experiences and challenges with animal care during the pandemic
 - Activists monitor social media posts for hints of changes in animal care
 - Scour institutional websites for information about research changes, particularly involving animals
 - Policymakers classified many researchers as '**non-essential**,' which prompted activists to ask: How can researchers claim animals are vital to research, and then classify the work with them as 'non-essential' or, worse, 'expendable'?
- Activists also responded to financial realities
 - Donations slowed, national animal rights conference cancelled, competition among groups heightened

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges Euthanized Lab Animals to Protect Employees From Covid-19. Now They Face an Onslaught of Criticism.

By Kevin Carey April 13, 2020



HOW ANIMAL RIGHTS GROUPS HAVE RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC

Very broad public records requests

PETA requests one copy of all of the following records – including, but not limited to, protocols, reports, after action reports, incident reports, investigation reports, and inspection reports, contracts, awards, grants, financial documents, memoranda, directives, instructions, regulations, policies, studies, correspondence, charts, graphs, meeting notes and minutes, drafts and working papers, notes and summaries of conversations and interviews, records of complaints and response taken, electronic mail, e-mails, text messages, social media posts and/or messages, Slack messages, listserv messages, photographic and/or videographic recordings, audio recordings, multimedia, and any other forms of written or recorded communication – from January 1, 2020, through the present, related to and/or concerning the purchase, acquisition, trapping, breeding, and/or use of animals for laboratory experiments at [REDACTED]

- 1) Any and all experiments that as of the present date have been suspended and/or ended in accordance with [REDACTED] response to COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus disease, 2019 novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and/or 2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease), such that they may be – but are not necessarily limited to being – categorized as extraneous, non-critical, non-essential, ramped down, disposable, unnecessary, non-priority and/or other similar terminologies;
- 2) The number and species of any and all animals who are in experiments at [REDACTED] covered by item number 1 above;
- 3) The number and species of any and all animals who are themselves categorized by [REDACTED] as extraneous, non-critical, non-essential, ramped down, disposable, unnecessary, non-priority, cull, sacrifice, and/or other similar terminologies;

- 4) The endpoint disposition (to include—but not be limited to—euthanasia, cull, sacrifice, kill, destroy, dispose and/or reduction in cage census) of any and all animals used in experiments at [REDACTED] covered by item number 1 above;
- 5) The endpoint disposition (to include—but not be limited to—euthanasia, cull, sacrifice, kill, destroy, dispose and/or reduction in cage census) of any and all animals at [REDACTED] who are themselves covered by item number 3 above;
- 6) Funds used to conduct experiments at [REDACTED] covered by item number 1 above, to include—but not be limited to—the purchase, breeding, housing, feeding, maintaining, and/or veterinary care of any and all animals used in said experiments, and/or the paying of salaries and/or wages of personnel who attended to any and all animals used in said experiments; and,
- 7) Funds used to purchase, breed, house, feed, maintain, provide veterinary care for, and/or pay salaries and/or wages of personnel who attended to any and all animals at [REDACTED] covered by item number 3 above.

HOW ANIMAL RIGHTS GROUPS HAVE RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC

Using accessed records to:

- Call for public investigations and sanctions of publicly-funded institutions
 - Borrowed from White Coat Waste Project' to focus on economics of animal based research
 - Seized on policymaker characterizations of 'non-essential' research
- Have written dozens of letters to state auditors calling for review of public colleges & universities
 - Form letters seek audit "of the use of public money, personnel, property, equipment, and space by the [institution name] for animal experiments deemed non-essential during the COVID-19 pandemic."
- Always accompanied by press releases to the relevant local news organizations.
- While highly unlikely PETA will be successful in having an audit conducted, they'll use this as a publicity stunt to try to call attention to its claims of unnecessary research using animals.

RESPONDING VIA PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND MESSAGING



The key: *Take the narrative from the activists*

- Unfortunately, policymaker labels of 'essential' vs. 'non-essential' have hurt
- We need to change the nomenclature regarding medical research and policy directives:
 - ✓ Not essential, but "*immediately critical to COVID-19 related research*"
 - ✓ Not non-essential, but "*research that can be suspended but resumed once the pandemic is better controlled*"
 - ✓ Research has been '*slowed*' or '*suspended*' as opposed to '*halted*' or '*abandoned*'
- Use this as an opportunity to an opportunity to turn the narrative:
 - COVID-19 vaccines could only have been developed through biomedical research using animal models
 - It's disgraceful that groups like PETA would use this crisis as an attempt to bolster fundraising

WHEN DEVELOPING MESSAGING...



Be prepared to answer: *What changed with animal care during the pandemic?*

- More than likely that husbandry care or veterinary care has not changed or changed very little
 - Open access to labs has likely changed
 - Staffing may have been staggered
 - Breeding of new lines may be stopped
 - Procedures like elective surgeries halted
- Why have such changes occurred?
 - Protect the staff - social distancing means fewer personnel on-site at a given time
 - Shortages of PPE may have occurred
 - The institution is putting the health and safety of its people first

WHEN DEVELOPING MESSAGING...



With publicly-funded research, decisions were made with taxpayers in mind

- If breeding continued, without the ability to care for the animals as per usual, the animals would have been wasted
- No data would have been gleaned
- Taxpayer dollars would have been wasted
- Cryogenically preserving breeding lines will allow research to resume once the pandemic is under control

If more drastic steps have been needed, make the story human

- Any decision was made in the interest of the health/safety of those involved
- Personnel complied with stay-at-home and social-distancing directives
- With staff reduced, and without the ability to care as usual for the animals, the decision was made to prevent the animals from suffering
- If affected species are rodents, say so, as the public is more likely to accept that than other species
- Above all... emphasize that any hard decisions that were made were made by choosing people over animals.

AND KEEP IN MIND...

Well-regarded public figures are on our side...



There are diseases in which you vaccinate someone, they get infected with what you are trying to protect them with, and you actually enhance the infection. You can get a good feel for that in animal models. The worst possible thing you can do is vaccinate somebody to prevent the infection and actually make them worse.



- Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director, NIAID
- White House Briefing
- March 26, 2020

BETTER & MORE COMPLETE INFORMATION CAN CHANGE PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Recent polls from Foundation for Biomedical Research shows that when Americans are presented with information regarding their role in research into COVID 19 treatments they are more supportive of the use of animal models.

- Three polls since March
- When informed about Fauci comments:
 - 64 percent said they support the humane use of animals in biomedical research, education, and testing
 - 22 percent said they oppose it
- But when polls in March, April and October simply asked about animal use in medical research, support dropped

Results indicate **continuing need to educate general public and policy-makers** about the important **role of animals in medical research**, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THANK YOU!

James O'Reilly, President
Massachusetts Society for Medical Research
Email: james.oreilly@msmr.org

