

Engaging young people with ethical issues in scientific research: Young people's perceptions of the use of animals in research in the UK

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Surveys of the UK adult population have shown that 83% conditionally agree with the use of animals in medical research (MORI, 2010). However, there are no comparable studies of young people. Prior to 2006, discussion of the use of animals in research and the ethical issues arising from such use was included in the Religious Studies and Philosophy GCSE and GCE specifications. Post 2006, with the increased emphasis in science GCSEs and GCEs on how science works, ethics, including the ethics of animal experimentation, became part of all science and biology GCSE and GCE curricula. Subsequent revisions from 2011 onwards have led to a reduced emphasis or exclusion of this important topic. With the imminent transposition of the new EU animal welfare Directive, 2010/63/EU into UK law, it is essential to discuss the use of animals in research with young people (our future electorate) and to determine their views on the topic

A short 20 minute presentation followed by the opportunity for students to ask questions on the use of animals in research was delivered in secondary schools and colleges within West Yorkshire. Electronic voting handsets were utilised to gather student opinions anonymously before, during and after the session. Their comments were also noted and collated

The seminar was delivered to Year 8 to Year 13 science students across the region. These schools included select grammar, comprehensives, those in economically deprived areas, faith and independent schools. The majority of students (80%) had never or only occasionally thought about the use of animals in research before the seminar, with only 37% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with their use. After the session, the level of acceptance had increased to 67% ($p < 0.01$, student t-test). When asked how new medicines should be developed and tested, 26% would use prisoners, 23% thought that non-animal (alternative) experimental preparations should be used whilst 22% would utilise research animals in the first instance. Students also had serious misconceptions about practices in research laboratories, for example, 53 % thought that research animals were kept in small confined cages. 26% of students also thought it was acceptable for those opposed to animal experimentation to use any means to prevent such research.

This study demonstrates the need for scientists, particularly those who use animals or animal tissues in their research, to engage in outreach activities in schools in order to provide young people with unbiased information on the use of animals in scientific and medical research. These outreach activities would enable young people to make an informed decision for themselves as to whether this use of animals can be justified.

MORI (2010) <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1343/Views-on-Animal-Experimentation.aspx>