Scientific research involving animals has always been a controversial subject. Reports concerning the use of animals in experiments are generally not balanced, tend to go for ‘shock value’ and usually present the negative side. Animal experimentation is an intensely ethical subject. It is also strongly polarised, so that neither the supporter nor the opponent seems to realise that the other side has an ethical perspective. There is an inclination of some to label experimentation as being motivated solely by profit, and for others to brand animal activists as anarchists. There is nothing unethical about experiments designed to produce drugs to cure people of illness, nor of garnering public opinion against the needless exploitation and torture of animals. These two positions are conflicting and every effort should be made to reduce this polarity in order to obtain a balanced and less radical view on animal use in experiments for human well being.

RDS (Research Defence Society) is an organisation based in the United Kingdom and represents medical researchers “in the public debate about the use of animals in medical research and testing”. The Society aims to provide information about the need of animal research and its spin-offs that have resulted in benefits to mankind. RDS which was founded in 1908, has been involved in drafting various guidelines for animal research the latest being “The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986”.

The website of the organisation contains information about the society, its structure, history, the role of animals in the research process and details of instances where animal experimentation has brought definite benefits in the fight against disease. There are also animal welfare facts with information on legislation, regulation and the ethical debate.

“Animal Research and Facts” link consists of estimates of the number of animals used in research and the types of experiments that are performed on them. A page opens up to a pictorial description of various animals ranging from the armadillo to the zebrafish, and their place in different research experiments. The research process and the extent of animal involvement in different experiments are explained in a related link. Populist myths on animal experiments are also dispelled in this section.

The “Medical Milestones” link contains a timeline on landmark animal experiments that have had a bearing on achieving cures for diseases. Amongst the notable inclusions are insulin, various vaccines, drugs for curing neoplastic diseases and gene therapy. Various procedures including blood transfusion, dialysis, heart transplants, coronary angioplasty are mentioned as direct benefits of animal research and their history is given in detail. A separate page highlighting recent research involving animals has brief explanations about experiments being performed for Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, diabetes mellitus, spinal cord injury and stroke amongst others.

The “Animal Welfare” page goes on to explain the ethical, scientific, legal and economic reasons for looking well after animals. The concept of the 3 R’s –Reduction, Refinement and Replacement are further elaborated and non-animal substitutes to tests are explained. The noteworthy inclusions
are the concept of using genetically identical animals in order to reduce the number of animals; the use of telemetric devices; replacing LD50 tests with Fixed Dose Procedures and the use of Limulus Amebocyte Lysate (LAL) test for pyrogen testing. The alternatives link has articles on the potential of in vitro testing and non-animal based procedures for common safety testing.

The “Hot topics and policy” link presents the other side of the coin - that of animal rights extremism. There are examples of tactics used by activists, ranging from use of explosives, targeting individuals, animal breeders and research organisations. There is a brief description of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCA) that “aims to crack down on the serious threat to UK medical research posed by animal rights extremism”. Debatable topics involving animals in research, that have aroused public curiosity viz. stem cell therapies, brain research, animal cloning and the potential for animal organs to be used in human transplants are summarised with hyperlinks for detailed information. The discussion forum consists of posts by members on some controversies on different aspects of experimentation. The opinion page makes for interesting reading as it airs the views of people in various walks of life on the need for animal experiments.

The “News and Resources” page hosts latest news, research headlines, a photo library, links and publications. A number of leaflets and educational material detailing animal experimentation are available for download. The RDS Blog which is linked from this page is a commentary on issues in animal research, animal rights and antivivisection. Members can access and choose entries from the categories of Extremism, Science, Debate, Media and Ethics. Monthly archives are also available, which can also be browsed by category and searched by keyword.

The frequently asked questions (FAQs) hosted on the site give adequate information about the organisation, the website and facts on animal experimentation in a concise form. The glossary is not very elaborate and even sketchy at places. The website sets out to provide a balanced view of the various aspects of animal experimentation, animal welfare, legislation and animal rights activities. It succeeds to a large extent but the overall flavour of the content tends to tilt in favour of a pro animal-experiment stance adopted by the society. The issue of computer aided learning (CAL) which is a major alternative to animal experimentation is handled superficially.

The website and the RDS Blog contain carefully researched articles based on an understanding of the historical and scientific facts on animal experimentation. They also address the need for research scientists, policy makers and the general public for discovering more about different legislations, animal welfare and the principles governing ethical animal research in the fight against disease.

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