

Science
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Editorial: Dying for Science?

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Most scientists are devoted to their work and are passionate about the potential benefits their research brings to society. But are they and their families prepared to die for their work? Should this even be a consideration when these individuals are working under carefully legislated and legal research conditions? For 13 University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), researchers, some of whom work with mice and others with fruit flies, this became a sudden reality.

Two weeks ago, a UCSC neurobiologist at home with his wife and children was awakened before dawn by a firebomb and found his home filled with smoke. Fortunately, the family climbed out of their second-story rooms to safety. Another scientist's car was destroyed by a similar firebomb at about the same time. This is only the latest episode in a string of violence, with five firebombs targeting UC research faculty over the past 3 months. A spokesperson for the Animal Liberation Front press office, credited in press reports for these firebombing attacks, said, "This is historically what happens whenever revolutionaries begin to take the oppression and suffering of their fellow beings seriously, whether human or nonhuman. It is regrettable that certain scientists are willing to put their families at risk...."

These are criminal acts, being investigated as an attempted homicide by local, state, and federal authorities. It is of serious concern that these acts of terrorism and their associated incendiary statements were not immediately condemned by our political leaders. There have been no high-profile or unified statements about the incidents, and days afterward, California's governor had still declined to comment. Those responsible must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Those who oppose animal research, even when conducted under strict federal and state laws, are free to express those beliefs. They are also free to reject the medicines--the fruits of animal research--that now allow us to treat disease and lead healthier lives. But they are not free to conduct a terror campaign. Scientists and their colleagues, from all disciplines, should speak out to galvanize support for expanded efforts to apprehend and prosecute these types of criminals. This may involve new laws and resources at both state and federal levels. Federal laws, including the Animal Enterprise Protection Act of 1992 and its subsequent 2006 modification, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, provide some protections that could be further strengthened. In addition, because of jurisdictional issues, these laws are not always applicable to acts in individual states, and they do not provide for state prosecution.

State laws that reinforce these protections need to be enacted. A proposed bill in the California Legislature (AB2296), which would extend protection to "animal enterprise workers" similar to that provided for politicians and reproductive health workers, has been much weakened from its original intent. In its original form, it would have prevented the posting of personal information on Web sites with the intent to incite acts of violence or threaten researchers and their families. If passed, the current form of the bill only enacts a misdemeanor trespass law. This is potentially useful in investigating offenders, but does not have stringent penalties. Perhaps we can learn from laws elsewhere, such as the United Kingdom's Serious Organised Crime and

Police Act of 2005, which has much stronger anti-harassment clauses and penalties for interfering with contractual relations. Its enforcement has been credited with a reduction in such crimes in the UK.

In a 2008 national poll (conducted by Research!America), Americans overwhelmingly supported scientific research (83%). Nearly 70% are more likely to support a presidential candidate who supports research, 75% believe that it is important that the United States remains a leader in medical research, and 90% want the U.S. to train more scientists. Our scientific enterprise lies at the core of our economic success, national security, and our very well-being. This is why all concerned citizens should rally to the call to stop anti-science violence. Our political leaders must reject these criminal acts as forcefully as they reject all other forms of terrorism.

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