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Animal rights terrorism

Activists have used increasingly dangerous tactics on researchers whose goal is to save lives.

By Frankie Trull

The firebombings of the car and home of two UC Santa Cruz researchers earlier this month reveal an unwelcome reality: Animal rights extremism is getting worse.

Over the last several years, militants have shifted their focus from breaking into research labs and institutions to targeting researchers and their families at home. In the past, they protested against scientists who work with higher species, such as nonhuman primates and dogs; now, they are even targeting researchers who use fruit flies.

These attacks, considered domestic terrorism and attempted homicide, should be a wake-up call to law enforcement. Congress recognized the danger that animal rights militants pose when it passed the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act in 2006. This law gave the FBI additional tools to pursue animal rights extremism and increased penalties for crimes related to it. The FBI has not apprehended anyone since the law was passed. It needs to make these crimes a higher priority.

The Santa Cruz bombings are just the latest instances of animal rights terrorism, a nationwide problem, although there seems to be a particularly active group of extremists in California. The attacks have included firebombs lobbed at homes, letters rigged with razor blades, firecrackers placed in mailboxes and vandalism.

These extremists have chosen to circumvent the legal system and use fear and terror as their primary weapons. In the last two years, the severity of home attacks has been alarming. In June 2006, the Animal Liberation Front claimed responsibility for an attempt to firebomb a UCLA researcher's home; it placed the bomb at the wrong house. In June 2007, a group called the Animal Liberation Brigade took credit for placing a firebomb under another UCLA researcher's car. Fortunately, the bombs in both cases failed to go off. Last October, the Animal Liberation Front said it was behind the flooding of a UCLA researcher's home with a garden hose, causing up to \$30,000 in damage. In February, an incendiary device charred the front door of that same researcher. Also in February, six masked activists demonstrating at a UC Santa Cruz researcher's home pounded on her door and allegedly assaulted her husband when he confronted them.

Animal rights groups sensationalize animal research by portraying scientists as violent animal torturers. In fact, researchers who use animals in their quest for new drugs and medical breakthroughs are human beings who dedicate their lives to alleviating the pain and suffering of both people and animals.

Animal research is done humanely and only when necessary; it is highly regulated by the federal government; and it is the foundation for almost every medical breakthrough of the last century. From antibiotics to blood transfusions, from dialysis to organ transplantation, from vaccinations to chemotherapy, bypass surgery and joint replacement -- practically every present-day practice for the prevention, treatment, cure and control of disease is based on knowledge attained through research using laboratory animals.

About 95% of all lab animals are mice and rats -- bred specifically for research. They are the animal model of choice for researchers because their physiology closely resembles that of humans and their genetic makeup is well defined. For instance, the mouse genome contains essentially the same complement of genes found in the human genome, so studying how the genes work in mice is an effective way of discovering the role of a gene in human health and disease.

Terrorist attacks like the ones in Santa Cruz have significant implications for the future of science in this country. Who knows what research might be curtailed by this terrorism? It's time for law enforcement to send a message to animal rights extremists by making a more concerted effort to apprehend those involved.

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