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Scientists rip animal protection activists

By Jennifer Harper

Scientists and physicians concerned about their own safety challenged animal protection activists yesterday, calling them "terrorists" and condemning their repeated attacks on researchers who use live animals in experiments.

"We felt it was important to respond publicly to the attacks that have been directed at scientists, their families, and their neighbors because to be silent in the face of the attacks is to condone them," said Dr. John Krystal, a Yale University psychiatrist who authored a joint statement signed by 87 researchers from Yale, the University of California, Stanford University, the University of Pennsylvania and other institutions.

"We condemn these misguided attacks," Dr. Krystal said.

At particular issue were two incidents at the home of Dr. Edythe London, a UCLA psychiatrist who uses monkeys in drug and tobacco addiction studies. In October, her Beverly Hills home was vandalized and flooded and in February it was hit by a firebomb. The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) — an underground group with worldwide membership — took credit for both acts in an anonymous press release.

The FBI classified the events as "domestic terrorism" and is still investigating.

"We find it galling that these researchers would call us terrorists when they are the ones inducing terror in animals in the name of science," said Dr. Jerry Vlasak, a Los Angeles-based trauma surgeon who acts as spokesman for ALF, specifying that he is not an active member of the group, but sympathizes with their cause.

"The vast majority of animal research doesn't produce anything useful for human beings. Even if it was useful, it isn't justified. It is still immoral," he added.

To protect UCLA researchers, the Los Angeles County Superior Court has since issued a restraining order against ALF and two other groups; UCLA condemned the attacks, though officials acknowledged some of Dr. London's research was funded by Philip Morris.

Activists, meanwhile, are reflecting on the situation. Dr. Vlasak will serve on a three-man panel April 26 at "Confronting Cruelty," an animal rights conference in Salt Lake City, addressing the "strategic and moral implications of breaking the law to achieve social change," according to the event Web site.

Dr. Krystal and his cohorts consider their proclamation — published in the academic journal *Biological Psychiatry* — "an urgent public statement," warning that "terrorist acts affiliated with ALF and other groups" are increasing and citing other attacks on researchers in California, Oregon and Utah.

The District-based Society for Neuroscience issued an advisory for its 38,000 members on Feb. 6, clearly outlining security precautions, plus tips on handling media inquiries, local law enforcement and civic affairs.

"It is deeply disturbing to see scientists under attack simply for pursuing research questions whose answers will ultimately benefit human and animal health. Although polls show Americans overwhelmingly support medical research and reject the use of terrorism, there has been surprisingly little outrage over the tactics of these extreme animal rights activists," said Robert Palazzo, president of the Maryland-based Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

"Humane use of animal models has led to all of our greatest advances in medicine," he added.