

Case 14

Caged rats

In a time of global terrorism and economic recession, the humane treatment of lab rats may not be high on many people's list of just causes, but that doesn't mean they don't have advocates.

Animal welfare advocates have long taken umbrage at the NIH (National Institute of Health)'s ambiguous position on animal welfare. Their argument is that the welfare of millions of laboratory animals is important and ought to be taken seriously, even if protecting that welfare constitutes an inconvenience or a financial burden.¹ One of the typical ways of affording laboratory animals some relief is giving them more space. Animal welfare advocates maintain that larger housing pens would improve rodents' wellbeing. According to ethologist J. P. Balcombe, studies have shown aggressive behavior among male mice when they were exclusively kept captive "in small, commercial cages."² In fact, the latest scientific research, which provides evidence of empathetic behavior among lab rats, suggests that the emotional capacities and needs of these rodents might be much more complex than previously thought.³

Perhaps in response to such concerns, for the first time since 1996, the NIH has updated its guidelines for the housing of laboratory animals. Research institutions wishing to secure funding from the NIH will supposedly have to comply with the new housing guide, which is designed to reduce the overcrowding of millions of rodents used for research every year in the U.S. The recommendations don't exactly specify deluxe accommodations, though. A mouse and her litter will be entitled to a minimum of 51 square inches, while a rat and her litter should get at least 124 square inches.⁴

Nevertheless, research institutions have objected to the new guidelines: giving each animal more room will require them to purchase more cages (and hire more staff to clean those cages), which means diverting money away from research on product safety, pharmaceuticals, and other causes that could improve the well-being of humanity. Furthermore, scientists argue, there is little research to substantiate the claim that rodents' quality of life would improve with larger cages. As Joseph Thulin of the Medical College of Wisconsin puts it, it is unclear whether more spacious enclosures "will have any measurable positive impact on the animals." If laboratory animals aren't going to experience any relief and fewer funds end up going to research, the new guidelines seem to be the equivalent of running in a wheel that ultimately doesn't go anywhere.

¹ Nell Greenfieldboyce, "Labs size up New Guidelines for Rodent Cages." *NPR.org*, Jan. 16, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/16/145172737/labs-size-up-new-guidelines-for-rodent-cages>.

² J.P. Bolcombe, "Laboratory Environments and rodents' behavioural needs: a review" *Laboratory Animals*, Pg. 40 (2006), http://www.pcrm.org/pdfs/research/testing/exp/Lab_Env_2006.pdf.

³ Ben-Ami Bartal Inbal et al., "Empathy and Pro-Social Behavior in Rats," *Science*, 334, 1427 (2011), <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/334/6061/1427.abstract>.

⁴ National Research Council of the National Academies. "Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals" (8th ed.) Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2012. <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/olaw/Guide-for-the-Care-and-Use-of-Laboratory-Animals.pdf#page=83>.

The importance of the new guidelines seems further weakened by the NIH's assurance to researchers that the housing guidelines are just a recommendation for minimum standards. In fact, overcrowding will be allowed as long as it is justified by the research and "the animals' health or behavior won't suffer." The ambiguity in the NIH's response has left scientists wondering to what extent these guidelines will be enforced and whether non-compliance will affect funding.

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