

Animal testing dilemma

by Colin Mac Donald

The subject of animal research invokes strong emotions. Some people are disgusted at the thought of using animals for research, while others hope it will lead to a cure for a loved one's malady.

Animal research occurs at most universities. Here at Dalhousie, researchers spend a great deal of time and money observing animal behaviour and experimenting with them.

Animal research at Dalhousie has been going on for at least 30 years. Over this time conditions under which research may be conducted have become quite stringent. According to Dr. D. Howard Dickson, the Associate Dean of Resource Planning in the Faculty of Medicine, a researcher must follow a series of steps before beginning experiments with animals. The scientist must fill out a protocol form that describes exactly what he or she wants to study.

Strict guidelines are set down by the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) and are not law, but are still enforced under threat of a shutdown by the Council. These guidelines cover everything from how animals are chosen to the amount of ventilation that the lab animals get while under the control of the Animal Care Centre, which is located in the basement of the Sir Charles Tupper Building.

Once a protocol form is submitted, it must be approved by the University Committee on Lab Animals before research can begin. Most research is funded by two groups — the Medical Research Council of Canada and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. Some research is done for private industry, mainly pharmaceutical companies. They provide funding through grants that come with no strings attached to the money. In some cases, contracts are signed that do not allow the researchers to release the information for a certain amount of time so that the company that requested the information will have first crack at it.

Dickson stressed that no product testing takes place at Dalhousie. In addition to outside research, medical students also use the facilities for study. Above all, Dr. Dickson emphasized that the research must have scientific value to even have a chance to be accepted at Dal.



Dr. Sylvia Craig and her furry friends.

PHOTO: LISA WAMBOLDT

Over the years, Dal has been involved in scientific study on fetal transplants with rodents, Alzheimer's research, and the much-publicized work on birth control for seals. Dal also participates in wolf research at an enclosure in Shubenacadie.

Dickson also said Dalhousie practices the three R's: reduce the number of animals used, replace animals with tissue cultures or computer models, and refinement of current research techniques. Despite this, Dickson says "some animals will have to be used until other options are available."

While some research is conducted in other departments, most is done by the School of Medicine and takes place in the Animal Care Centre. Its director, Dr. Sylvia Craig, noted that the purpose of the centre is to provide care

and housing of the lab animals. In her capacity of director, she has the power to shut down any project that she deems to have gone outside the original outline of the project. She said she has not had to stop any research projects in the last year.

Within the locked and unmarked facilities in the basement of the Tupper building, cats, dogs, goats, pigs and even a few dozen ground squirrels from Alberta are housed and experimented with. Virtually every animal that passes through the centre is eventually killed after the completion of the research.

On the subject of the moral implications of animal research, Craig acknowledged the dilemma: the animals do provide vital information but re-

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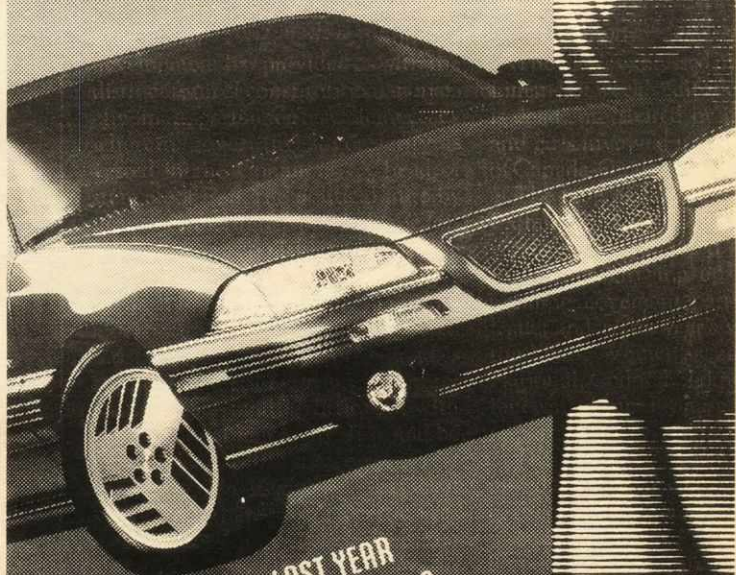
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