Animal experiments jump 21pc says ethics group

RESEARCH: Hundreds of thousands suffer in the cause of science

by Simon Collins
science reporter

Scientists slaughtered 141,532 animals in New Zealand last year in the interests of research.

A further 179,379 animals were used in experiments but survived after varying degrees of suffering.

The annual report of the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee, published yesterday, recorded a jump of 21.7 per cent in the number of animals used in experiments to 320,911, equivalent to the human population of Manukau.

The number of genetically modified animals quadrupled to a record 6711. Scientists predicted in February that increasing GM medical research could push the total number of animals used in experiments to more than 1 million in the next five to 15 years.

Animal rights activists protested outside the head office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Wellington after the report was released.

Spokesman Mark Eden said the wide use of animals to test medicines for humans could not be justified because of the differences between animals and people.

"Some, for example, an artificially induced cancer tumour in a mouse is not an accurate model for cancer occurring in a sick human," he said.

The medical director of the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Dr Ernie Willoughby, warned MS patients this week that they should not be confident that new treatments that worked in mice would work in people.

"Not all the treatments or effects in the animal model have always worked out in humans," he said.

But the chairman of the Auckland University animal ethics committee, Dr Don Love, said modern genetics enabled scientists to be much more precise than they used to be.

"Now we are going for a more targeted approach," he said.

"We need to target a particular gene to make it faulty, or express a particular gene in the animal that we would hope would replicate a human disease.

"Now we can use [technology] to return the animal back to normal health. You first have to make it crook to replicate the disease, and then you have to treat it to make it normal."

GM mice alone at Auckland University accounted for 492 of the 6711 genetically modified animals used in experiments nationally.

The university also accounted for the largest total number of animals used in university experiments, 41,061, up from just over 10,000 the previous year.

Dr Love said the increase was partly because animals used in several three-year experiments were all reported in the last year of the experiment.

However, the biggest animal experimenter overall was Hamilton-based AgResearch, which used 55,926 animals including 104 GM cattle and 847 GM mice.

ON THE WEB
www.nzherald.co.nz/documents