

Taking cruel care of man's best friends

In China, some 7,600 black bears exist squeezed into cages with catheters implanted in their gallbladders for the extraction of bile for Chinese medicine, according to a CNN report. Those that have room to move at all sway their heads back and forth, a sign of extreme pain and distress. Once the bear is dead, its gallbladder is worth as much as \$18,000, which is another reason that this sort of insane cruelty continues—animals suffering terribly, victimized by and for humans.

According to the Japan Anti-vivisection Association, 236,167 dogs were left at Japan's pounds in 1995 because they were no longer wanted by their owners. This was just a fraction more than the number of dogs netted by dogcatchers that same year. But no matter how the dogs got to the pound, their fates were basically the same.

Even more upsetting is the plight of Japan's research animals. The life of any research animal is unfortunate, but this is especially so in Japan, where there are no binding laws or legislation to protect them.

Research animals are truly man's best friends. They are sacrificed—often literally tortured to death—expressly for our sake, in the pursuit of better medical treatments and more knowledge. Their plight is nothing but tragic—living out their days cowering in cages, at the mercy of researchers who often are more interested in “pure” results than in making the animals comfortable or sparing them needless pain.

Years ago I was a laboratory assistant for heart and lung research at Harvard Medical School. I feel that, in some cases, animal research may be necessary to help animals as well as humans. But we have an ethical duty to ensure that research protocols are planned so that a minimum of animals are used and that they are adequately anesthetized and kindly treated.

In the United States there are stringent guidelines as to how our best friends are to be handled—NIH (National Institutes of Health) PHS (Public Health Service)

policy and AAALAC (the American Association for Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care) accreditation make it impossible to get research funding from either the government or private companies without abiding by these guidelines. AAALAC membership requires an institution to uphold certain standards for cage size, ventilation and exercise, veterinary care and anesthesia. Unannounced inspections are made and membership is suspended if substandard conditions are not improved. Noncompliance makes it impossible to have research results published in medical journals. The system may not be perfect, but it is in place, all researchers are aware of it and there is a system of active enforcement.

Having witnessed in Japan rats with

their paws impaled into corkboard, skulls sawed off and brains implanted with needles—procedures done with nothing but muscle relaxant that paralyzes the animal but has no effect on pain—I have long been concerned about what is being done to prevent such situations. Four out of four research doctors I talked to recently from leading university institutions told me there were no restrictions or national guidelines for animal research in Japan at all—that it was completely up to the institutions or doctors involved.

However, according to Kazuyoshi Maejima, who holds a doctorate in veterinary medicine at

Keio University, guidelines do exist in Japan, as well as one law against cruel treatment of pets (with fines of up to ¥30,000). Unfortunately, he says, many researchers are unaware of the guidelines and others may not be complying because there is no enforcement.

I recently read in the American Institute of Laboratory Animal Resources Journal a report written by a Japanese research doctor denying the need to protect laboratory animals because “Japan has a long tradition of animal protection based on the Buddhist teaching...Japanese people act according to this fundamental concept of personal morality with little need for laws or regulations.” This was the justification for why Japan

does not have strict guidelines, enforcement or funding for the protection of animals.

If you take a look at pets in Japan, however, one isn't so convinced about this special Buddhist sensitivity. In Japan, dogs sit outside tethered to short leashes day after day, year after year, in the same spot in heat and cold. The lucky ones get a brief walk once or twice a day. Even loving owners seem to be unaware of the cruelty with which they treat their pets.

A Japanese newspaper article in November 1996 reported that at least 700,000 dogs and cats were killed in 1995, most of them gassed in specialized chambers and many of them possibly burned alive. Others were killed by painful methods such as muscle relaxant overdose and strychnine nitrate administration.

Maejima thinks that regulation is badly needed in Japan. He claims that unrestricted freedom of research and money seem more important than the animals' lives to many researchers. This is something he learned after producing with Kokan Inc. a synthetic laboratory model of a rat that can be used to teach research techniques, which not only spares the lives of many lab animals, but also greatly minimizes the discomfort of those that must be used.

Maejima says researchers in foreign countries are quick to see the value of such a model that spares the lives of animals, but that Japanese researchers immediately say that they can use 10 live rats for the price of one model and don't want to spend the money. A majority of the ani-

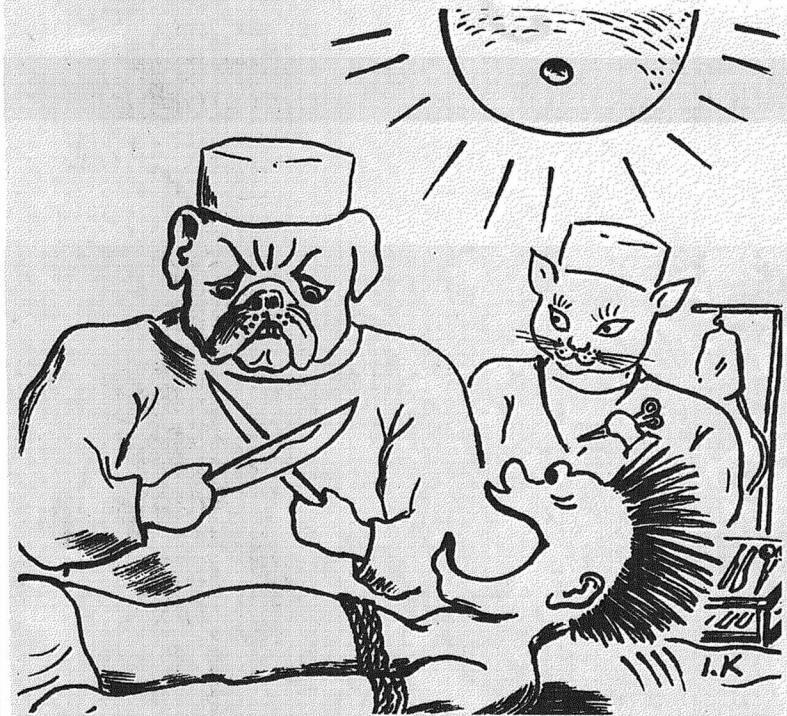


Illustration by Itsuo Kiritani

mal models have been sold abroad.

Maejima would like to institute a system in which specific people are held responsible for an animal's treatment. He also sees a need for an ethics committee that is composed of laymen from the community, as well as researchers, to decide how to protect Japan's laboratory animals. He wants a law requiring that those caring for lab animals be professionals, as in most other countries, and to have spot

enforcement inspections without warning. And he wants all researchers to be aware of and follow what guidelines there are.

Once a year, laboratory workers from university and research institutions throughout Japan conduct a memorial service for the souls of the animals they have sacrificed. How much better it would be if they dispensed with the prayers and, instead, made some strict rules to regulate their own behavior.