

Labs decry animal cutoff

Kobe pound ends supply for medical scientists

By CAMERON HAY
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KOBE — The Kobe Municipal Government's decision to stop supplying abandoned pets to Kobe University for experiments has raised fears among medical researchers that Japan's growing animal-rights movement will severely impede development of new medicines here.

Scientists at the university worry that the move, the first in Japan, will set a precedent among local governments throughout the country.

Should this happen, and the supply of animals for experiments dries up, it will have a serious effect on medical research here, according to Masashi Shiomi, associate professor at Kobe University School of Medicine.

"This issue can't simply be approached from the point of view of animal rights. The key question is 'are experiments on animals necessary for medical research?'" Shiomi asked.

"At this stage they are vital. Tests using cultured cells, for example, are cheaper, but they cannot replicate the enormously complicated effect of a new substance on a living body," he said.

The municipal government moved to stop providing animals to the university because pet owners were abandoning their pets on the street out of concern over the fate of those at the city pound, a Kobe spokesman said.

"We want to be able to assure people that all animals brought to the pound will be humanely put down, rather than experimented on. Otherwise we'd have a very big stray animal problem on our hands," said Susumu Yasuzawa, manager of the city's public sanitation section.

In 1981, the pound supplied 650 dogs to laboratories at a cost of about ¥500 each. But as public awareness of animal experiments grew, the city steadily decreased this number.

In 1990, only 42 dogs were sent to the university, and from last August no animals have been supplied.

At a meeting last fall, city officials told the university it planned to phase out its practice of supplying dogs over the next couple of years. But in March the school was informed that animals were no longer available.

"Our decision was a response to public concern and the activities of the animal rights movement," Yasuzawa said.

In February, local members of the Japan Anti-Vivisection Association and other citizens held an exhibition of photos depicting the suffering of animals used in tests.

Organizers called the event a success. They are planning a similar one for August, but Shiomi has criticized the exhibition as not reflecting the real situation in Japanese laboratories.

"Nearly all the photos were taken in American and European laboratories about 10 years ago. But no mention was made of this. It was quite misleading," he said.

One of the exhibition organizers, Kathleen Yamamoto, admitted it would be fairer to list the location of photos in the future. However, most labs in Japan have a strict "no visitors" policy to make it impossible for the public to study the real situation, she said.

"We can't solve the problem without knowing what's really going on inside Japanese laboratories. But at the moment, we're not allowed in to inspect them," she said.

Yamamoto met Shiomi last month, she said, but was refused permission to enter facilities at Kobe University.

"Last year a member of JAVA was invited to a lab in Tokyo, and later broke in and released some of the animals. We have now installed a new security door, and plan to show them our lab in the future," Shiomi said.

The university is opposed to on-site inspections by the public because it fears details of its research might be leaked to rival laboratories.

However, it would probably allow access to a local government inspection team that had the expertise to evaluate the scientific significance of the research, Shiomi said.

Currently, many local governments in Japan, including

Hyogo Prefecture, are studying such a system of outside inspection as one way to balance the needs of medical research with the concerns of animal lovers.

Others like the Tokyo Municipal Government are planning to phase out the supply of animals to laboratories over a few years.

"You must remember that JAVA's ultimate goal is the total abolition of all experiments involving animals. Focusing on 'cute' pets and asking for on-site inspections are only the initial tactical moves," Shiomi said.

A JAVA spokesperson in Tokyo, Fusako Nogami, confirmed the group's goal is the total abolition of animal experiments.

"We don't believe that these experiments are necessary for medical research, and in any case disagree with the thinking that animals should be sacrificed for humans," she said. "Site inspections are an improvement on the situation now, but they can't prevent all cases of cruelty."

The university is presently able to continue research using animals supplied by Hyogo Prefecture, but Shiomi is unsure about the future.

"I wish the people who are so concerned with the suffering of animals would spare a thought for the suffering of people with diseases whose cure may depend on these experiments," he said.