

Raids cause French workers to take stock

- Break-ins may set back research by five years
- Animal welfare committee to be created

Paris

Two weeks after anti-vivisectionists raided research laboratories in Lyons, stealing more than 100 animals, the potential implications for French biomedical research are beginning to sink in. The animal rights lobby has posed little threat to researchers in France and there have been only two raids on animal houses in the past ten years. But now the national medical and health research institutes (INSERM) to which the Lyons laboratories belong realize that they are ill-prepared to defend themselves either in terms of security or in the arena of public debate.

Shortly after the break-in at INSERM units 94 and 37 during the night of 20 May (see *Nature* 339, 326; 1 June 1989), a hitherto unknown group called Arche de Noé (Noah's Ark) telephoned the news agency AFP to claim responsibility. The following evening, national television news (Antenne 2) broadcast a macabre video-recording of the raid, filmed by Arche de Noé, together with statements by members of the group. Last weekend, a popular magazine, VSD, published colour photographs of the break-in and a chronology provided by one of the group. INSERM has called for charges to be brought against the perpetrators for forced entry, theft and damage to government property. But French police, unused to dealing with this kind of crime, have so far been frustrated in their attempts to seize the videotape and to arrest the self-declared culprits.

INSERM Unit 94's work was recently published in *Nature* (337, 265; 19 January 1989) and subsequently criticized by an advisor to the British Home Office (see below). But, despite the coincidence, the INSERM laboratory may have been singled out for attack because of its links with Colin Blakemore, Waynflete Professor of Physiology at the University of Oxford. Blakemore, who has been the prime target for anti-vivisectionist attacks (including a death threat) for the past few

years in Britain, has collaborated with the Lyons laboratory for the past 14 years (see page 414).

"There are well-established links between animal rights groups around the world", says Blakemore, who explains that a newsletter called *The Liberator* regularly publishes lists of names and addresses of contacts as well as tactics. "I think they just spotted a growing connection between Oxford, which is the focus of hatred in England, and the Lyons laboratory, which happens to be one of the internationally best-known labs in neuroscience." Several of the 38 monkeys stolen from Lyons had been used in experiments carried out by Blakemore at Unit 94.

The raid on the adjacent Unit 37, where organ-transplant research is carried out, often on dogs, coincides with a rise in public support for animal rights. France boasts an estimated 10 million pet dogs for its 55 million population and has a popular animal rights champion in Brigitte Bardot, who only a few weeks ago presented her views in a television broadcast. A bill to improve the law relating to domestic pets is currently passing through parliament.

The Lyons raid raises questions about differences within Europe in laws governing animal experimentation. Mr Clive Hollands of the Committee for the Reform of Animal Experimentation has claimed that the experiments, which involved the blinding of two macaque monkeys before birth, caused "an unacceptable level of suffering" and "clearly would not have been authorized under British law" (*Nature* 339, 248; 25 May 1989), but this is a matter of opinion, as every British application is judged on the balance of its biomedical benefits against the suffering that would be experienced by the animals. One researcher at INSERM Unit 94 agrees that the French law is less severe than the new British law. But, he says, similar experiments have been carried out in the United States and have been published in the journal *Science*.

In France, animal experimentation is regulated under a 1987 Act which follows guidelines developed by the European Parliament. Under this law, once a researcher has been authorized by the Minister of Agriculture to carry out animal experiments, his licence is valid for ten years. Similarly, approval of laboratories and animal houses is granted for five years.

The law places responsibility on the licensed researcher, says Professor Pierre

Tambourin, who has been delegated by the director general of INSERM to co-ordinate animal experimentation policy matters. Tambourin admits that the licence is open to abuse: "there is nothing in the law to stop a madman doing anything he wanted to an animal", but points out that this is true everywhere. Each INSERM unit undergoes a detailed in-house review every four years, he says, and peer review of papers submitted for publication also serves to control ethical issues.

According to Blakemore, it is common practice for reviewers of leading neuroscience journals (he cites *Brain Research* and the *Journal of Neuroscience* as examples) to be asked to comment on the animal welfare aspect of a study. *Nature*, he says, does not do this.

Faced with a demand to justify animal experimentation, INSERM is discovering it has no official documentation and no cogent arguments. "The benefits were always taken for granted", says Tambourin. The Lyons animal houses are on open view to those visiting patients at the adjacent hospital. Blakemore says it was "wonderfully refreshing" to work in the Lyons laboratories, adding that in 14 years there have been no complaints from the public.

But there are no immediate plans at INSERM to introduce the level of security now necessary in Britain and the United States. "Of course we will replace locks and install alarms", says Tambourin. "It's stupid. We have nothing to hide. It is a negation of our own ethics. Research must be open permanently to the public." A national committee for animal welfare is being set up with representation from the Society for the Protection of Animals as well as researchers, in addition to the existing national animal experimentation commission which was established under the 1987 law.

The loss at the Lyons laboratories is estimated at more than FF1 million (\$150,000). But research there has been set back by five years, according to one researcher — the time it takes to breed animals and train them for experiments. All the laboratory notes of three researchers were also stolen during the raid. He also believes that many of the stolen monkeys will not have survived. The colony included well-established social groups. If two dominant males were accidentally put together, he says, they would kill each other. In the meantime, INSERM is determined to ensure that the culprits are prosecuted, while researchers in Lyons think they have evidence that the raid was planned as long ago as last Christmas.

Peter Coles

■ In Australia a new code of practice on animal experiments is to be implemented in response to pressure groups. See page 412. □

Announcement

Joseph Palca, Washington News Editor, leaves *Nature* this week to join the US journal *Science*. He will be joined by Marcia Barinaga, *Nature's* West Coast correspondent, who was recruited by *Science* last month. At *Science* both are expected to perform similar roles to the ones for which they were greatly appreciated at *Nature*. □