

## LEADING ARTICLE

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# Animal Airlift

Mob rule by animal rights activists cannot be allowed to stop research



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**W**hen should a government be able to tell a privately run airline what it should and should not carry? A good answer is: when lives are at stake. On this basis passengers are barred from taking knives and guns on board civilian aircraft. There is a similar argument to be made in favour of airlines carrying animals bred for scientific research. This research saves lives. Not one major recent breakthrough in treatments for premature babies, cancer, diabetes, cystic fibrosis or Parkinson's disease would have been possible without it.

Despite this, most of the world's airlines refuse to carry research animals for fear of being targeted by animal rights activists. Monkeys, dogs, rodents and more exotic species are routinely flown around the world for zoos and pet owners, but not if destined for laboratories.

For the activists, this is a victory, but it is a victory of loud voices over wise ones; of sentiment over science. A formal complaint to the US government against four of the world's largest airlines, British Airways among them, aims to overturn this victory and remove a significant obstacle to "legal, legitimate and necessary live animal research". It deserves to succeed.

Besides BA, the complaint names United Airlines, China Southern Airlines and Qatar Airways, all of which transport live animals, but not for research. According to the US National Association for Biomedical Research (NABR), which represents American animal research labs, their refusal impinges [on] our medical and research community's ability to develop new medicines to save lives and cure disease". This is not an exaggeration but a statement of fact. For almost all new drugs, animal testing is required by the Federal Drug Administration in the US and other regulators before they can be licensed for advanced clinical trials or general use.

Mice are useful for early-stage research but even they are becoming difficult to transport for research. As for the non-human primates most often used for advanced research, their value, as William Newsome of Stanford University has put it, lies in being "20 million years of evolution closer to humans than a mouse". Many of these animals are bred in Asia for use in the US and Europe. If they cannot be supplied to labs, the research cannot be carried out because scientifically valid techniques that do not rely on animals do not exist. If scientists could have fine-tuned anti-retroviral therapy for Aids patients or deep brain stimulation for Parkinson's sufferers without using animals, they surely would have. As it is, hundreds of thousands of humans are alive thanks to their work.

The NABR's complaint is based on a legal argument that airlines are unfairly discriminating against research animals by refusing to carry them when they would if the final destination was a zoo. The US Department of Transport has to rule on the

complaint and may or may not be persuaded on what is a technical point of law. However, the simple choice between helping or hindering vital work that saves human lives will remain open to the airlines either way.

This should be an easy choice, but the half-formed if well-intentioned arguments of the animal rights lobby and its celebrity supporters have made it hard. That is why, if governments can make life easier for the airlines by taking the decision out of their hands, they should.

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