

The response reproduced below was submitted to the consultation held by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics on the ethics of research involving animals during October-December 2003. The views expressed are solely those of the respondent(s) and not those of the Council.

Anonymous #24

As a doctor involved in biomedical research I am in favour of the controlled use of animals in appropriate research settings. I am also aware that the UK has arguably the most restrictive environment in the world in relation to animal experimentation, and that this is limiting the research output of UK scientists.

However, the main point I wish to make is one which I suspect will be less commonly voiced.

There is general agreement that alternatives to animal experimentation should be used wherever possible.

This extends to using human tissue instead of animals wherever possible.

However, in the past 3 years, since the 'post-mortem organ retention scandals', there has been an enormous increase in the restrictions placed on research using human tissue. This has extended far beyond the use of post-mortem tissue, which has obvious emotional importance to relatives. It has encompassed human tissue removed from living patients for therapeutic or diagnostic purposes, where that tissue proves to be 'surplus' to the requirement for its examination in the hospital pathology laboratories. Such surplus tissue is normally incinerated as 'surgical waste'.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics report into the subject, published in 1995, has been described as 'outdated'. The position has moved so far from that excellent document's conclusions that the latest publication from the Chief Medical Officers, available at <http://www.doh.gov.uk/tissue/legislationproposals.pdf>, indicates that EXPLICIT consent will be needed from patients before 'surgical waste' can be used in teaching, training or research. To do otherwise will be a criminal

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offence. There are no details on how such explicit consent will be obtained, recorded and retrieved by those who do not have direct contact with the patient - such as laboratory workers.

Inevitably this will inhibit research using human tissue. The relevance to your present inquiry is that scientists will be driven to use animals where human tissue is preferable but is no longer available.

I recently attended a training session for individuals applying for Home Office animal experimentation licenses. Two of the delegates there told me over coffee that they would prefer to use human tissue, but were using rats because human tissue was no longer available to them.

Unfortunately this will be extremely difficult to prove. I enquired further about the circumstances and both individuals stressed that they would deny this stoutly if asked, for the simple reason that this admission could lead to the removal of their Home Office Licenses.