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Emily Patterson-Kane a

a American Veterinary Medical Association, Schaumburg, Illinois
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Thinking Outside Our Cages

Emily Patterson-Kane

American Veterinary Medical Association, Schaumburg, Illinois

Researchers seem to be stuck reiterating the now-familiar argument that barren boxes are bad for welfare and that rodents are due ethical consideration. But the prerequisites for real progress are new kinds of arguments, new types of data, and removal of very real practical and cultural obstacles to implementation of meaningful enrichment. We must discover what we have to do to effectively change the practices of people who have care and control of rodents in the laboratory, not just husbandry staff but those who develop the institution’s protocols, job descriptions, and resourcing. Researchers are inventors of information, and like any inventor we should experience no satisfaction until our ideas are fully implemented—and we must be an active participant in that process. If we are asking animal caretakers to make deep, paradigmatic changes in their thinking, it is imperative that we in turn develop an emotionally positive understanding of areas important to them. For unless the welfare advocates truly understand the issues such as budgets, biosecurity, and branding, why should the people responsible for those subjects listen to us?

I agree that a small, barren, shoe box cage is inadequate housing for rats or mice. But is it productive to reiterate the now familiar argument that a specific type of box has known limitations and that rodents are due ethical consideration? I suggest that the continued use of barren shoe box caging is not based on the belief that rodents are insensitive mechanisms, biologically programmed for an inert and unstimulating life.

The situation is that cages are adequate for the needs of many nonhuman animal users so long as they do not dwell too much on their insidious impact on the animal’s brain, body, behavior, and validity as a “normal” model. Rodents
are hardy vermin who, although they may not completely fulfill their potential or enjoy the experience, in many cases get along surprisingly well in a laboratory cage. Indeed, their ability to breed and survive under adverse conditions may be one of the main reasons they are an almost archetypal animal used for experiments.

I personally argue that adequate housing can probably be achieved within a cage of some type—and even within the range of existing commercial cage products such as the Scanbur Enriched Rat Cage System—if animal caretakers are empowered, well informed, and conscientious. But this, for me, is not really the crucial issue. Were the entire research community committed to providing animals with the housing that best met the animals’ needs, the best housing methods would be determined and adopted, whatever they may be.

I suggest, however, that the use of animals in laboratories will continue for some time, whether or not one assumes other researchers support this state of affairs. Movement to extra-cage systems for rodents might be more plausible when the industry as a whole has adapted to the idea of enrichment as an ongoing and open-ended process of refinement. Housing of some animals may improve incrementally whereas others may make sudden leaps (such as with the uptake of stall housing rabbits); I am not sure, however, what is gained by pitting incrementalists against revolutionists or even abolitionists (Balcombe, 2010/this issue; Mellor & Stafford, 2001) when the most pressing goal is to overcome the obstacle presented by “do-nothing-ists.”

What is required to get the change among the recalcitrant is not more of the same types of arguments and more of the same kinds of data (that being just a higher dose of the medicine to which they are clearly resistant). We need to develop the kinds of arguments and provide the types of data to gain new influence and expertise. In addition, we must discover how to effectively change the behavior of the people who have care and control of rodents in the laboratory or, if necessary, we have to replace them. Researchers are inventors of information; like any inventor, we should experience no satisfaction until our ideas are fully implemented—and we should be active participants in that process.

We also need to empower and support professional husbandry staff to advocate for the animal and to advocate effectively and from a position of authority. Animal care staff members need to be on Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUCs), conducting their own research, and they need to be provided with full access to the peer-reviewed literature. They should be addressed with the same respect accorded other professionals and mix on the same level with the people who control the budget, overall culture, and goals of their institution. Animal care workers are part of a key profession within an institution. Animal care workers bring to the fore the need to adapt environments to animals, and their own work environment should not treat them as largely fellow inmates with the rodents—rarely seen outside the animal house and rarely
responsible for more than routine husbandry tasks. Equally, all those who work in an animal-using institution should see themselves as animal caretakers with the relationships and responsibilities that this implies.

We need to respect and meaningfully engage with the reasons for resistance from researchers, executives, managers, and administrators. People will do the right thing if you can help them remove the obstacles; to do that, however, you have to genuinely understand what those obstacles are. Housing refinement is not always win/win; pretending otherwise just means you lose the trust of those you are trying to convince and convert. However, if you can tip the balance with financial savings, good public relations, animal health benefits, and the glowing support of the research community, be it by baby steps or by great leaps, most people do want to do right by animals.

We need a supporting cross-institutional framework that makes species-appropriate housing something attractive and desirable. Enrichment and animal welfare messages must be emotionally positive messages where we gather all our colleagues together and say, “We are doing good, important work here . . . and we can do even better.” After a reasonable time, if such methods fail, we need to have effective, vigorously enforced animal welfare regulations. To create proactive IACUCS, we need to be willing to turn in our peers if they resist affirmative approach and to back them up when they take a principled stand. We need to actively pursue legislation, regulations, and protocols that mandate better environments for animals and the funding for an effective inspectorate.

If we, as scientists, know that caging for animals in the laboratory needs to be improved—be it an enriched cage, pen, stall, or outright replacement of animal use (and this has not happened)—what is our responsibility? Are we proud of an academic tenure and promotion system that overwhelmingly rewards publishing to an audience of our research peers in so-called high impact journals—rather than in the trade and industry publications read by those who have care and control of the animals? What about our tendency to inform, and even scold or vilify, rather than engage and understand the very real concerns of these groups? What about the paucity of animal welfare scientists working in industry, in regulatory agencies, government, and advocacy and in the executive levels of animal-using institutions, where they could nurture the implementation of research rather than just be satisfied with its mere existence?

If a significant proportion of graduate students and working academics are not willing to adopt new methods, venture into new careers, and learn new skills—moving beyond the familiar and the academically prestigious methods of yore—how can we criticize the hidebound experimenters wanting to stick with their familiar baseline, members of the husbandry staff not wanting yet another task added to their minimum-wage job, or the executives trying to minimize their budgets and protect both the profitability of their companies and the jobs of their respective staffs? If we are asking them to make deep, paradigmatic
changes in their thinking on subjects that are not (rightly or wrongly) currently considered core to their duties, perhaps we need to do the same by reaching out to their communities in a positive, applied, and sustained manner. If we require an executive to understand animal welfare, perhaps it is time for the animal welfare scientist to develop an emotionally positive understanding of areas such as business management, the mechanisms of bureaucracy, branding, business psychology, and economics.

Perhaps it is not just the rodents who are stuck in their cages, unproductively frustrated, performing the same stereotypic behaviors, and futilely wielding their bare teeth against the metal bars. Perhaps we all need to think outside our own cages and start, as a discipline, to develop the right tools for accomplishing the task we have set ourselves.

REFERENCES
