

Full support

Germany should follow the United Kingdom's lead and spell out the benefits of animal research.

Scientists in the United Kingdom have reason to be grateful this week, after research institutions came together to pledge greater public support for researchers who use animals in their work. The UK 'concordat' sets out how institutions that undertake animal research will publicize it. Signatories, which include major charities, drug companies and universities, say that they will increase the amount of information they provide about what happens in their laboratories to inform the public about the value of animal research, and will report annually on how they are moving to greater openness.

It is a laudable aim, and scientists in another European country must be wondering what they need to do to earn similar support. While the United Kingdom was putting the final touches to its concordat, six newspapers in Germany were running a full-page advertisement questioning whether scientists who experiment on animals are even human.

The advert opens with the quote: "Animal experimenters are a particular type of creature — one should not casually call them human." It publishes a photograph of primate researcher Andreas Kreiter of the University of Bremen, a long-standing target of campaigners in the country, and describes him as a tormenter of animals whose research is without value. The advert closes with calls for citizens to treat all animal experimenters with contempt and denounce their work publicly.

Last week, the powerful Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany declared in a press statement that the lobby group that placed the adverts, Tierversuchsgegner Bundesrepublik Deutschland, had crossed acceptable boundaries. The alliance's strong words represent a welcome change from its

unhelpful default policy of keeping its head below the parapet. But German scientists deserve more.

Now that it has broken its long silence over the use of animals in research, the alliance cannot retreat. It should follow the UK example and push for wider public awareness. Given the political weight of the institutions it represents — the Max Planck Society, the Leopoldina national academy, the universities and the Helmholtz Association among them — such a stance could make a crucial difference.

Scientists across Germany have been lobbying for nearly three years for the alliance to create a web resource for journalists and the public that makes available the true facts about research using animals. The Max Planck Society, which is taking the lead in a dragged-out effort to gather data about the value of such a resource, has doubts. But this should proceed as soon as possible.

The Tierversuchsgegner's advertising campaign may have been expressly designed to provoke a response, to keep the subject of animal research in the media. That is all the more reason for the alliance to collate an accessible pool of information for the public.

An immediate goal could be to prevent a recurrence of the advert, which ran in publications including the quality intellectual nationals *Die Zeit* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. What were they thinking?

Germany takes the right of freedom of expression very seriously. But newspapers must balance this right with the first clause of Germany's 1949 constitution, which states that the dignity of humans is inviolable. This was designed to ensure that a regime could never again label people 'subhuman', and so unworthy of life, as the Nazis did.

This is not the first time that such disturbing terminology has been levelled at science in Germany. At a public lecture in March, the award-winning novelist

Sibylle Lewitscharoff attacked reproductive medicine, and referred to people born by artificial insemination as ‘half-creatures’.

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The use of such aggressive language in debates about the ethical limits to medical research is worrying. When it comes to the use of animals in science, it underlines the importance of a proactive public stance. The most fiery animal-rights groups may be small, but they amplify their messages by appealing to people’s emotions. To make their points, they often lie or omit key information about the tight regulation and oversight of animal experiments. Journalists have no ready source of counter-information. Research agencies have been nervous of commenting openly, fearing that it might open more scientists to attack. Many medical charities avoid mentioning that they support research with animals for fear of putting off donors.

In 2010, frustrated academic and industry researchers created the Basel Declaration, whose signatories commit to speaking publicly about their work and the value of experiments with animals. More than 2,300 individuals around the world have signed up — 431 of them in Germany — and 13 institutes and societies have given their support. Still, it remains a relatively small effort, and relies on donations to cover its costs. The UK concordat represents a more powerful tool that other countries, Germany chief among them, should emulate.