

Experiments in self-punishment

SELF-punishment is an ancient and noble tradition, and its various forms have been established over many millennia. Nevertheless, I believe I may have discovered a new one.

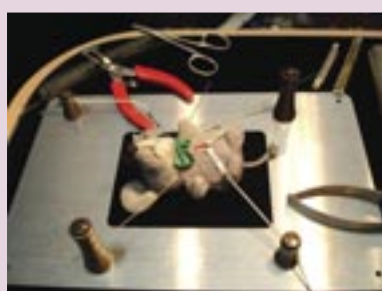
In recent times I've taken it upon myself to cross oceans at enormous personal expense in order to give lectures criticising the ethics of animal experimentation at international laboratory animal science conferences. My lectures summarise key evidence contained within my book, *The Costs and Benefits of Animal Experiments*, recently published by Palgrave Macmillan.

In June I spoke at Europe's second-largest laboratory animal science conference, held in Istanbul (*Veterinary Practice*, September). To my great surprise, I was neither shot down in flames nor pelted with ripe tomatoes. Indeed, my talk actually went rather well.

It certainly attracted a lot of attention. And somehow the difficult questions from the audience I had so been dreading resolved into a single growl from a grim-looking lady promising me that "We'll read your book!", for which I duly thanked her.

And let's not forget the very stern looking gentleman who spent 20 minutes scrutinising my book, literally page by page, before announcing he wanted to order bulk copies for his university!

Maybe these lab animal meetings weren't so bad after all, I thought. Maybe, in fact, I should try an even bigger one! Europe's largest lab animal science conference was the only bigger one forthcoming, so in September I polished my Powerpoint presentation and headed to the 49th



A surgical model on view in the conference exhibition.

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Annual Meeting of the Society for Laboratory Animal Science in Dresden.

This time I would face an audience of up to 700, nearly all of whom would probably hate me. If that didn't warrant some kind of self-punishment medal, I didn't know what would.

First, however, I rolled out of my cheap hotel bed for a dawn run around the local park. I was delighted to discover that a series of ever-more

ANDREW KNIGHT reports on his recent visit to Dresden for a meeting on laboratory animal science and a chance to see the sights

sculpted gardens led eventually to a palace, at the end of a reflective lake. The rest of Dresden did not disappoint either. For centuries it was the royal residence of the Kings of Saxony, who filled the city with cultural and artistic splendour.

Known as the Jewel Box, the stunning baroque and rococo old city centre was completely destroyed by Allied bombing towards the end of World War II. Fortunately it appeared to have been completely rebuilt, often using the original stones, somehow convincingly retaining its mediaeval look. Tragically, the 25,000 civilian lives lost were not so easily restored. Many estimates are far higher.

Unfortunately, the conference itself proved far less interesting. Most of the sessions seemed to be in German, or focused on obscure, esoteric fields of animal research. I nobly resisted the temptations to visit the local castles instead, dutifully remaining to leaflet and mingle with the researchers during the coffee breaks.

Feeling alone

No other speakers appeared to be addressing animal ethics, and not even a single animal rights activist was protesting outside. I felt very alone. Briefly, I even considered chatting to the hulking security officer guarding the front entrance. Notwithstanding his presence and that of his ubiquitous colleagues at nearly every door, some of the industry representatives still became visibly anxious when I asked to photograph their exhibits.

I was spared their company and that of the laboratory animal scientists attending the gala dinner later that evening, as apparently the Society for Laboratory Animal Science is one of the world's few scientific societies unable to provide vegan fare other

than salads.

And so instead I explored the stunningly picturesque old city by night. A wonderful extreme vegan runner friend and her partner, who are now resident in Dresden, took me on a tour of Dresden's darker side, which proved rather interesting...

All good things come to an end, however, and all too soon the time of my doom approached. Finally, it was my turn to speak. Thankfully, however, only about 50 people were left at the end of the conference, where they had squeezed my ethics talk between one covering laboratory management, and another about how to make staff feel better about conducting harmful experiments on, and then killing, the animals they care for.

Palpable hostility

The palpable hostility emanating from the remaining audience more than compensated for their diminished ranks, however. Nevertheless, thanks partly due to copious nerve-induced background study and rehearsal, my presentation actually went quite well. And once again, the questions at the end I'd been so dreading, were a bit of an anti-climax.

One very grumpy old man took the microphone and stated that he "disagreed entirely with my methods and conclusions". However, the only reason given was that he thought one of the studies I'd cited was unpublished. It was trivial to point out that he was mistaken, because all the studies I'd cited were published in peer-reviewed journals. Another of lesser courage handed me a nasty note, then fled.

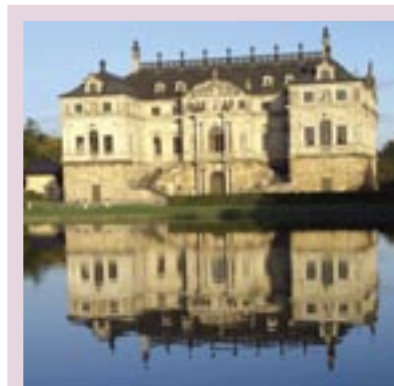


The author making friends in the Gothic quarter of Dresden.

So, in the end it appeared that my fears of any real challenge were again unfounded. And to date, I'm still waiting for someone to provide a scientifically credible challenge to the evidence and arguments contained within my book.

Nevertheless, I think that for my next extreme challenge, I'll be trying something a lot less stressful, a hell of a lot more fun, some place a whole lot warmer and sunnier.

Shark-diving would do nicely, I think, before those wonderful creatures all go extinct. And I'm pretty sure I would prefer their company.



Grober Garten Palace lake and (below) the palace and gardens.



A night view along the River Elbe.