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News: Q&A

The once-quiet scientist

A former animal researcher decides to speak out.

Richard Monastersky

In 2006, concern over the welfare of his family caused Dario Ringach to stop using animals in his research. A neuroscientist at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), Ringach had been receiving threats from animal-rights extremists over his experiments involving primates. Then, an undetonated firebomb was left next door to the house of a colleague, apparently because the activists had the wrong address.

After three years of keeping a low profile, Ringach is now trying to raise public support for the use of animals in research. This month, he published a [commentary](#) on the subject in the *Journal of Neuroscience*¹ and a [letter to the editor](#) in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*² in which he calls on scientists to publicly support such research. His coauthor on both was David Jentsch, a neuropsychopharmacologist at UCLA whose work involves primates and whose car was firebombed earlier this year. *Nature* spoke with Ringach about his concerns.



Dario Ringach.

D. RINGACH

You say that animal-rights extremists are winning. Why?

You can see this in a recent Pew research [survey](#) on public opinion on science. Only 52% of the broad public supports biomedical research involving animals. And over the years, this has consistently declined.

What is behind this trend?

A lot of organizations at different levels have had a tremendous impact — from work that the Humane Society of the United States [based in Washington DC] has been doing in exposing failures in the food industry, to work that PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, based in London] is doing in trying to reach out to children very early.

Hollywood and many celebrities support their causes, at the same time as they support biomedical research. But they do not appear in public saying we need to support biomedical research and the use of animals.

What can scientists do to combat this trend?

They should explain to the public why their work is important, what kind of procedures we take to minimize the suffering of animals in the lab, and what the consequence is of stopping the use of animals in research.

I think it is a good idea to invite the public into the lab to show what's going on. Over the years, universities have been reluctant to open their labs, but that has created a lot of suspicion. I think that's wrong.

Universities and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have been criticized for not doing enough to protect researchers. What should they be doing?

They should offer the protection that investigators and their families need to do their research. The NIH should probably demand that institutions that accept their grants must be aware of this situation and that they might need to provide security for particular types of researchers.

Both institutions and the NIH should also engage with the public and not just leave it to the investigators.

After being quiet for so long, what made you speak up?

What's changed is I think we're getting awfully close to the situation where somebody may be killed. There is a general trend toward polarization in our society, from the debates on health care to abortion; we had an abortion doctor killed not too long ago. I think all these events are catalysing the possibility that a scientist might be killed.

The situation has changed a lot since my decision. At the time, it was me and a handful of investigators facing these groups alone. Things have changed, and universities such as UCLA are doing more to make sure these investigators are safe.

The take-home message from my own personal experience is: don't leave people alone to confront these issues. They need the support of their institutions and their colleagues. I hope that nobody else will have to face this decision. That's why I have decided to speak up.

I thought I had to start speaking up in the hope that first, these attacks will stop, and second, that the public will understand we are open to dialogue but we can only do so in an environment where we know that we will not be attacked when we go back home.

References

1. Ringach, D. L. & Jentsch, J. D. *J. Neurosci.* 29, 11417-11418 (2009).
2. Ringach, D. L. & Jentsch, J. D. *J. Neurophysiol.* 102, 2007 (2009).

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