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Newsletter

July 2006

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A Visit to a Mexican Lab Animal Facility

By Cindy Pekow, DVM

Recently, a new research animal facility opened at the Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco (UJAT) in southern Mexico. Some of you in WBAALAS may remember meeting Araceli Olivares at some of our branch events a few years ago. Araceli is the manager of this new facility, called a “bioterio” in Spanish. The bioterio represents a dream come true for Araceli, and is the result of a lot of hard work on the part of many people at her university.

The facility is a single story building, designed with a clean/dirty corridor system. It has rooms for colony (breeder) animal housing, housing for animals on projects, cage wash, cage prep, research procedures, locker and shower rooms, storage, office, and an education room. The education room is equipped with computers with internet access, and audio-visual equipment, plus the start of a library of educational materials. Facility equipment includes a large autoclave, and a Garbel waste-disposal unit. Individually ventilated caging units house some of the animals. Hallways feature glass brick windows to let in light, but provide privacy and heat reduction. The bioterio is the only unit of its kind in southern Mexico, and is a real feather in the cap of the university.

A particular challenge in the tropical area of southern Mexico, is an air handling system that can deal with the constant high humidity and heat. Each

animal room has its own separate air conditioning unit. Space has been allocated in the cage wash area for a rack washer, though the unit has not yet been purchased. For now, cages are hand-washed by a dedicated staff. People entering the animal housing areas of the facility must don gowns, gloves, caps, booties, and masks. Currently the bioterio houses rats and mice, though rabbits may soon be added.

I had the privilege of working with Araceli a few years ago, when she visited the US for one year, to learn about laboratory animal science. She completed her goal of passing her LATG certification examination from AALAS, literally finishing the exam just hours before her return flight to Mexico. Araceli kindly invited me to visit her new facility, and so in early April, I journeyed to the city of Villahermosa. While there, as a guest of the UJAT, I had the opportunity to teach several laboratories for graduate students on rat and mouse handling and techniques, and to present some seminars on laboratory animal housing and research animal strain and stock origins.

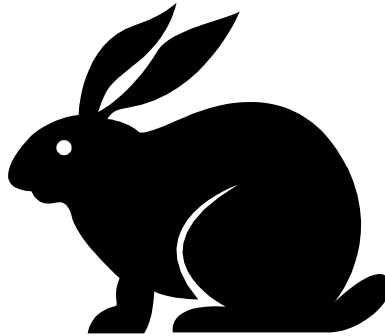
There are some interesting differences in laboratory animal science practices from what I commonly see in the US, compared to what I observed in Mexico. For example, here we have a high level of concern with security and the threat posed by animal rights activists. Such activism is rare in Mexico. Though outside doors are kept locked, the concern is more to keep the facilities and equipment off limits to those who don't need to enter. Araceli received some teasing for insisting that animal shipments arriving at the airport be transported to the facility in an air-conditioned vehicle. Although the university okayed her request, in a community where air conditioning is not available to all, to some people the research animals seem very pampered.

Mexico has recently published a set of laboratory animal care and use standards, which are not mandatory. Facilities and institutions that adopt the new standards will likely have improved access to funding and perhaps improved acceptance of research work by other scientists or journals. UJAT is working toward adopting the new standards. I discussed with some researchers at the university the pros and cons of forming an animal care committee. It was interesting for me, who has always had to deal with an IACUC, to understand the perspective of researchers who have not had this additional oversight. My US colleagues who were working during the first years of mandated IACUCs in the US probably well know how researchers greeted the idea of this oversight. The Mexican acronym for this committee is CICUAL.

The UJAT researchers voiced concerns that such a committee represents for them additional paperwork, bureaucracy, and possible delays in getting work accomplished. They wanted to be sure that the committee would not evaluate the science (like a funding agency) as much as be concerned with animal use and care.

However, most of the investigators agreed that the dividends of having a CICUAL could include peer assistance with animal protocol design and technicalities, improved public understanding of animal research, and improved acceptance of their work by other agencies and journals.

My visit was truly an enjoyable experience, and one in which I learned some new perspectives and ways of doing things. The animals I saw and worked with were healthy and well cared for. The people were warm and welcoming. I plan to keep in contact with Araceli and the UJAT researchers, and I'll be excited to see how the bioterio continues to grow.



Curse of the Real WereRabbit?

“Monster Rabbit”

The British town of Felton has approved hiring two marksmen to hunt down an oversized rabbit that has been ripping up and devouring crops. “It is a massive thing. It is a monster,” local resident Jeff Smith told the Northumberland Gazette.” The first time I saw it, I said ‘What the hell is that?’” Smith claims to have seen the black and brown rabbit, which has one ear bigger than the other, as have other residents. The British Rabbit Council says the sightings are credible, and that some rabbits, like the Continental Giant, can grow up to 26 inches in length. Local gardeners have hired armed guards to protect their patches from the ravenous rabbit.

The Seattle Times

Friday April 14, 2006

Section A Earth Week



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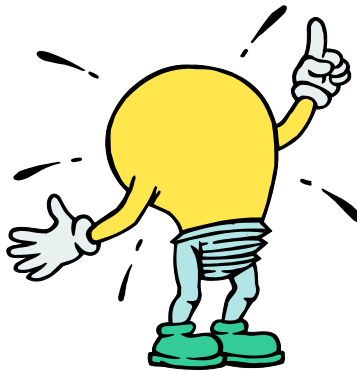
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News Updates

Moms with healthy bodies—kids with strong minds?

Exercise for mom might prove beneficial for junior's mind, according to a recent study in mice. Research over the past decade has shown that limited neurogenesis continues to take place in the brains of adult vertebrates, specifically in the dentate gyrus, a region of the hippocampus closely linked with learning and memory.

Studies have shown that physical activity can enhance this process in mice, and Gerd Kempermann and colleagues at the Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine (Berlin, Germany) recently attempted to determine the impact of exercise by pregnant mice on brain development of their pups. In their study, embryos from


animals given access to a running wheel from the earliest stages of pregnancy showed relatively reduced levels of hippocampal cell proliferation; however, cell proliferation in the hippocampus increased significantly after birth, resulting in a 40% increase in total granule cells relative to pups from control animals (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, 7 March). This increased proliferation was apparent from shortly after birth and appeared to subside by the time of weaning.

The authors have yet to ascertain the significance of these findings with respect to actual hippocampal function in the young animals. They strongly caution against prematurely extrapolating these findings to humans but hope to better understand the potential relevance of this phenomenon through future studies.

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Guilty Verdicts in SHAC trial

ON 2 March a federal jury in Trenton, NJ, convicted the animal rights group Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty USA (SHAC USA) and six of its members of using their website to incite violence against individuals affiliated with the contract research firm Huntington Life Sciences (HLS). The charges included animal enterprise terrorism, stalking, and conspiracy. Each defendant could be facing a jail term of at least 3 years and a \$250,000 fine; sentencing is scheduled for June.

Prosecutors charged that Philadelphia-based SHAC USA used the internet to organize a 5-year campaign of threats, harassment, and vandalism against employees of the East Millstone, NJ firm, as well as companies that did business with HLS. SHAC USA members maintained that their actions were protected under the First Amendment.

This is the first case to be tried under the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, which was enacted in 1992 and expanded in 2002.



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EyeOpeners

Peru eyes U.S. market for tasty guinea pigs

BY RICK VECCHIO
The Associated Press

LIMA, Peru — After 34 years of patient tinkering, researchers at Peru's most prestigious agrarian university have bred a new culinary export they hope will scamper onto dinner plates throughout America and the world: the super guinea pig.

The animal is a cuddly companion for millions of children in the United States. But in Peru, the rodent's birthplace, it remains a vital source of protein in rural communities, a mainstay of Andean folk medicine and a common religious sacrifice to the gods.

"It is well known that Peruvians eat guinea pig. Foreigners are more reluctant to eat it as they see the animal as a pet," said Gloria Palacios, director of La Molina National University's project to promote guinea-pig exports.

"I think if they become familiar with the cuisine, maybe suddenly they'll give in and be tempted to try it," she said. "It is really delicious."

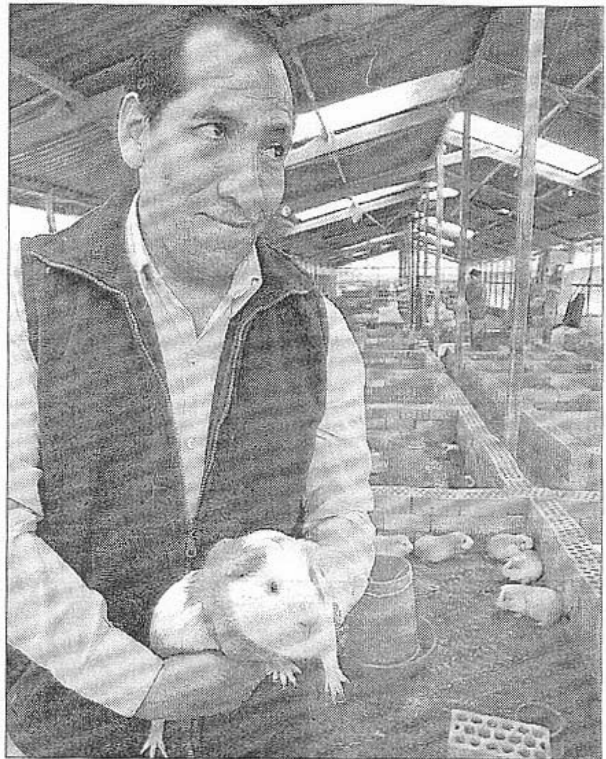
Peruvians consume an estimated 65 million guinea pigs each year. It is a dining experience that normally requires two hands to pick scant, sinewy meat from a bony carcass — often with the head staring up from the plate.

But earlier this year, La Molina university started exporting the "Peruvian Breed" — faster-growing, plumper, tastier guinea pigs — to the United States, Japan and several European nations that have large Peruvian immigrant populations.

The 1,000 guinea pigs shipped out weekly — mostly to the United States — each weigh nearly 2½ pounds, said Dr. Lilia Chauca, head researcher of the breeding project.

In comparison, she said, the guinea pigs raised on alfalfa and vegetable peels in nearly every rural Andean household weigh between 10½ ounces to 1½ pounds.

The meat is high in protein and low in fat and cholesterol and has a distinctive flavor, similar to rabbit. Archaeological evidence shows guinea pigs were domesticated in Peru as far back as 2500 B.C., and had deep cultural and religious significance. Guinea pigs are still a common tool of ritual healers, or "curanderos," who use the animals to diagnose illnesses.



MARTIN MEJIA / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Humberto Yaringano carries a "Peruvian Breed" guinea pig at La Molina National University in Lima, Peru, where they are raised for export.

From the beginning of the Spanish colonization, the Catholic Church brutally suppressed Indian religious icons. But the guinea pig was spared.

Today, churches in Lima and Cuzco still display Indian depictions of the Last Supper with Jesus and the 12 disciples eating roasted guinea pig.