

Illustration by Damian Shields

HOUNDED OUT?

Having survived years of intense lobbying, violent attacks against its staff and a shocking television exposé, the busiest pharmaceutical research facility in Europe is about to go underground. But it will continue to kill 500 animals a day. So is this really a victory for the animal rights protesters? Eamonn O'Neill goes behind the razor wire at Huntingdon Life Sciences to find out

NO, WE haven't been chased out," says Huntingdon Life Sciences managing director, Brian Cass, the man behind the embattled Cambridgeshire laboratory which has just announced it's moving its entire business infrastructure to the USA. "It was a strategy that we'd been working on for some time."

Many argue, however, that the story of Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) is in fact one of a once profitable pharmaceutical research site, which carries out more experiments on animals than any other facility in Europe, being brought to its knees by a rag-tag collection of animal rights activists. The protesters have physically threatened staff and placed unprecedented pressure on investors, shareholders and financial institutions even vaguely connected with the site. One City commentator who'd had to stop dealing in HLS stock after protesters targeted him commented ruefully: "It's anarchy one, democracy nil."

There are international borders less well fortified than Huntingdon Life Sciences' HQ. Bales of razor wire top the high fence which runs round the perimeter. A police van with blacked-out windows stands on sentry duty at the gate, funded by a one-off £1 million government payment. The squat, bombproof gatehouse is staffed by wary security guards who screen guests from behind reflective windows. Thick metal inner-gates, topped with lights and guard dog signs, form the last barrier.

A strained normality exists inside the headquarters. The UK has a stellar reputation for research work in fields related to genetics, cancer, Parkinson's Disease, Aids and countless other illnesses. Part and parcel of this CV is the hidden reality that almost every pharmaceutical company has to use animals at some stage during their testing process. Many contract out animal research to facilities like Huntingdon. Testing on animals is, by law,

the last stage before new drugs go into human clinical trials. But massive protests against such experiments have compelled half a dozen leading companies to write to the Home Office warning that they are being forced to reconsider testing in the UK because they can't guarantee the safety of their employees. Even Japanese companies, who invest about £1 billion in this sector, are jittery. In fact, the whole pharmaceutical industry in the UK is under threat. If Huntingdon can go, they could all go.


The animal rights lobby in the UK is very powerful. When in opposition, the Labour Party accepted a £1 million donation from this coalition. Concerned activists are regular fixtures on high streets up and down the country. Their displays show animals covered in blood being subjected to what look like appalling experiments. Although little information is given about where these photos come from, it does not really matter: the shocking images are ▶

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