

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

1-1981

Conversation With Henry Spira: Draize Test Activist

Lynne Harriton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hensint>



Part of the [Bioethics and Medical Ethics Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harriton, L. (1981). Conversation with Henry Spira: Draize test activist. *Lab Anim*, 10, 16-22.

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Conversation With Henry Spira: Draize Test Activist

Interview by Lynne Harriton

The Draize eye irritation test, which is used to test new cosmetic and ophthalmic products or products that might get into consumers' eyes, has recently come under concerted attack by animal welfare activists. The activists believe that a more elegant eye-damage test could be developed, sparing the many rabbits used annually for the Draize test.

The usual protocol of the Draize test is as follows: Six rabbits are put into restraining stocks, and the test chemical is put into the pouch of one of each rabbit's eye; the second eye serves as a control. The rabbits are then observed at one hour, 24 hours, 48 hours, 72 hours and sometimes as long as twenty-one days later. The observers look for specific changes in the test eye—redness, iritis, opacity, chemosis—and judge irritation according to a standardized scoring system based on those changes.¹ The rabbits generally are not left in the stocks and generally do not receive local anesthesia or analgesics even if the test substance is expected to be irritating or painful.

The coordination of the animal welfare anti-Draize action is being handled by the Coalition to Stop Draize Rabbit Blinding Tests. The Coalition has 409 institutional members, including such organizations as the Humane Society of the United States and the Chicago Anti-Cruelty Society. The Millenium Guild, which has run full-page ads criticizing Revlon for using the test in the *New York Times* and in other major newspapers around the country, is also a member of this coalition. The organizer of the Coalition is Henry Spira, an English teacher in Park West Public High School in New York City.

Spira was also responsible for the successful organization of humane groups in the American Museum of Natural History cat sex studies protests, the repeal of the New York State Metcalf-Hatch Act demanding that publicly-supported pounds release their unclaimed animals for research, and the protests against the Amnesty International simulated torture studies using animals.

Rather than trying to second-guess the tactics and rationales of the Draize test activists, LAB ANIMAL decided to go to the source for information. Mr. Spira very graciously gave us the following interview.

Mr. Spira, why did you and the Coalition choose to focus on the Draize test?

We chose it because the most rapidly expanding area, as far as the use of animals is concerned, is safety testing. Altogether, there are probably over 100 million animals used each year in the United States, the largest proportion of which are used to test product safety.

Actually, there were a number of reasons we chose the Draize test in particular. One of them was that it's the type of test that people can identify with -- people know what it feels like to get a little bit of soap in their eyes. For most people the eye is a vulnerable area.

Another reason was that the test animals were rabbits -- rabbits are seen as symbols of innocence. We also wanted to expand away from cats and dogs.

Also, that same test has been used for the past forty years; people know that science has advanced in forty years -- we don't kill rabbits anymore to find out if women are pregnant. Why hasn't the Draize test

advanced? Dr. Smyth, the former head of the Research Defence Society in England, which exists to justify, promote and defend the use of animals in research, suggested in his book *Alternatives to Animals in Research* that it should be possible to find alternatives for the Draize test.² The reason is that you're not interested in metabolism in the Draize test, just in eye irritation -- it's a delimited subject matter. In fact, you're not looking to hurt somebody's eyes -- you're looking for the point at which minimal damage occurs to the cells. So the test is crude just on its own merits; it's irrelevant to mutilate the eye of the rabbit if you're only trying to find the point at which damage begins.³

Also, a number of studies have shown that the results of the Draize test itself are not easily reproducible - that different labs get extremely different scores on the same test irritants.⁴

Many industries use the Draize test -- the chemical, soap and detergents Industries for example. Why did you choose the cosmetics industry?

An important part of any struggle is what people's perceptions are. If you don't hook up with people's perceptions, you're not going to win.

Most people perceive that it's not beautiful to harm others, especially when the end goal is trivial and frivolous. I think that there are very few people on the street who'll say, "Yeah, go around and blind rabbits to produce another mascara."

But what about contact lens cleaner or shampoo? Do you see shampoo as trivial?

It's not the idea of shampoo's being trivial. What's trivial is to put *another* shampoo on the market. The Draize test is used to safety test a new product, which has been developed only for profit.

Then, why did you choose Revlon out of all the possible cosmetics companies?

The reason we picked on Revlon was strictly a matter of tactics. Revlon is the leader of the cosmetics industry; they are very strongly identified with beauty. And our slogan is that hurting rabbits isn't beautiful. We had to choose the strongest contrast. People will still use cosmetics regardless of what we say. To make an economic impact we felt we had to target one company and make it worth their while to research alternatives -- in a way, to make it cost-effective for them.

What did you say to Revlon, if anything, when you started?

We suggested to Revlon before we even started our public relations program that it would be cheaper for them to put up the research money rather than get all this bad publicity. We suggested that they put .01 percent of their gross revenues -- which would be around \$240,000 now out of \$2.4 billion -- into alternatives research

We also suggested that the whole industry could tax itself for joint industry project on the development of non-animal methods, and that Revlon, as the leaders of the cosmetics industry, could set a precedent. We gave them various scientific approaches, too, based on Rowan's and Rack's papers.^{3,5}

How did Revlon react?

In a way they were very disdainful of us. We explained that we weren't after a public relations victory -- we were looking for expertise and funds for research. A year and a half after our first meeting in 1978; they said they were going to push [our position paper] onto another committee; and that all they could guarantee was that somebody would look at the paper. At this point, we just figured that if we couldn't have a collaborative approach, we'd have an adversary approach.

What had you expected?

The way we'd figured it was that when we gave Revlon the pitch, they'd say to themselves, "Look, it's 240 thousand bucks to get these troublemakers off of our backs." What's the big deal? They spend \$240 million a year in advertising.

We had misjudged what would happen at the American Museum of Natural History also. A researcher there had been mutilating cats for twenty years to observe their sexual performance using National Institutes of Health grants.⁶ We'd figured that the museum would say, out of their own self-interest; "We've researched this for 20 years; we've found out everything we need to know. We're finished with the experiment." That would have defused the whole subject right in the beginning.

But they didn't do this. They wanted to extend the experiments -- as if they wanted to teach us a lesson, to push our faces in the mud. However, they were more vulnerable than we were. People began to ask, "Well, supposing they do find out about the sexual performance of mutilated cats? Who gives a damn? How is this going to raise the quality of our lives? Is this really where we want our donations and taxes to go?"

How did you get your message on Revlon to the public?

We ran a series of full-page ads in New York. [Revlon's corporate headquarters are in New York City.]

How much did the ads cost?

About \$78,000 according to *Chemical Week*⁷. Some people contributed their time and monies producing the ads.

Where did the money come from?

The money for all these ads came from the Millenium Guild, whose president is Pegeen Fitzgerald [an animal rights activist and a radio personality in New York City]. They put a coupon on the bottom of each ad. They've put the money coming back to them from the coupons into new ads.

Where do operating costs for the Coalition come from?

Organizations within the Coalition, including the Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Anti-Cruelty Society, have vast resources. The Coalition itself has no need to raise funds. [After a number of questions, we came to understand that although the Coalition has many institutional members, it has no paid staff.]

What were the results of the advertising campaign?

The original ad had a big impact. You put something in the New York Times and everybody knows about it -- it's been like an international press release. There were stories about the ad in the Bergen, NJ papers, stories in Advertising Age. The story of the Draize test activity and the ad itself has been on television: We've been featured on 20/20 and Speak Up America, both network programs.

Do you think you may have, when presenting the "horrors" of the Draize test to the consumer, presented biased material? For example, according to Revlon, "Stocks are only used to prevent the animals from hurting themselves during the first few moments after the test begins. The animals are then released and are free to eat, drink and rest as they wish." And according to Avon, the second largest cosmetic company in the U.S., "Avon has not used stocks to hold

rabbits since 1965. The animals are held in the arms of the technician during the test procedure." Now, according to a public letter from you (representing the Coalition) to Michel Bergerac, chairman of Revlon, you stated, "chemicals are tested for days in the eyes of conscious, restrained rabbits ... " and in another circular – the one with the reprint from the first *New York Times* ad -- you stated, "Every chemical and household product from shampoos to oven cleaners is being forced into the eyes of conscious rabbits for up to 21 days ... " Were you trying to give the impression that the chemicals are put into the rabbits' eyes each day and that the rabbits remain in stocks throughout the testing process? That's the impression we got.

If you're running a [public opinion] ad, or if you're trying to get people out to a demonstration, you have to use the strongest language you can without actually deceiving them. People's perceptions were that animal research is necessary because it saves lives and can do away with human suffering. You have to find something dramatic that is going to challenge that sort of credibility; the Natural History Museum study was an ideal target for that reason, and so is the Draize test.

What we said was that Revlon used the Draize test, which they do – they will tell you how many animals they use, that they don't use anesthetics, et cetera.⁸ Then we added to our description what the government says has to be done in the Draize test – what the official guide calls for.

Henry, how did you – personally -- become interested in the animal rights movement?

I'd read Peter Singer's 1973 article in the *New York Review of Books* and then I took a class of his. Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*,⁹ took animal rights away from sentimentalism and atrocity-mongering -- where priorities were based on how cute and how popular the animal was -- into a consistent position where the point wasn't loving the animals. The point was that because these animals have feelings, they ought to have rights.

Since Singer's book, animal rights activity has not been based on popularity and visibility but on the number of animals involved and the intensity of their suffering. So the focus is now on factory farm animals and on laboratory animals.

Another change is that the issue is no longer "cruelty." Cruelty happens in individual cases, here and there, when someone is cruel to his or her animals. In institutionalized or legalized suffering, the people who hurt animals don't do it because they get their jollies from hurting animals. They do it because it's an accepted way of teaching science in the classrooms, it's an accepted way of producing food for people's dinners, it's the accepted way to safety test new products. The suffering has nothing to do with intent; intent is irrelevant.

The suffering is also invisible people who eat steaks don't go to the slaughterhouse to pick them out, don't go to a factory farm where the animal is unable to move from birth to death; labs don't open their doors for visitors' days. In fact, we believe that if people really knew what was happening, things would be changed -- there would be a tremendous fury and outcry.

You told us once in another conversation that your interest in animal welfare had grown out of your interest in human rights -- can you tell us about that?

Basically, I've come out of the human rights movement. I'd been active in the trade union movement -- I was the editor of an insurgent paper in the maritime union for six years. I'd been active in the civil rights movement – I was in Mississippi, in the Deep South. I was active in the anti-war struggle. When I read the Peter Singer article, I got a picture of what was a holocaust, in effect, for the animals. It occurred to me

that this wasn't right, wasn't fair, and something needed to be done about it. So I tried to see what I could do about it.

By applying the tactics and organizing skills you had learned in the human rights movements?

Yes, but the strategies and tactics are not exclusive to the human rights movements or to the animal rights movement. They are part and parcel of the whole history and tradition of struggles for justice. On the one side you have the people with the power and the apparatus, and on the other side you have the people with only the integrity of their ideas and the fact that they are fighting for justice – and that they have the possibility of mobilizing a great deal of sympathy for their cause.

Yes, but what about lab animal testing that has to do with cancer and other truly devastating diseases? What does cancer testing have to do with justice? Are you against research using animals when human lives are at stake?

The point of all this testing is our survival -- the survival of our species. I think our survival will be served a lot better if we show a concern for others, in this day and age when we can obliterate the whole planet. Taking into account the feelings and interests of others, having policies based on the idea of not harming others, will stand us a lot better now. The philosophy behind the animal rights movement is broader than not hurting cats and dogs. Many of us would feel more comfortable if we felt others weren't being pushed around, regardless of their species, human or non-human.

Do you have anything to say about the balance of nature? Frogs eat mosquitoes and alligators eat frogs, et cetera.

There is a difference. For us it is not a matter of survival. We can be healthy without eating other animals, for instance. What's the point of all these centuries of civilization if we feel that if a cockroach can do it, why can't we?

Have you been talking with scientists at all -- do you see animal rights activists and scientists as adversaries?

Traditionally there has been an anti-science bias in much of the anti-vivisectionist movement. But we [the Coalition] have attempted to build bridges with the research community. Also, the people who have done the conceptual work in these struggles have been people whose interest is research. Dr. Leonard Rack is a scientist and a physician, and he has an enormous amount of respect for science. Also, Dr. Andrew Rowan and Robert Brown of the Chicago Anti-Cruelty Society are both intellectuals; the focus of their lives, really, is science.

They aren't interested in drowning the movement in tears. They ask -- "What is the situation? What can we do about it?" They're using science from the point of view of social struggles.

Also, one of the big breakthroughs in the museum fight was the article by Nicholas Wade in *Science* magazine.⁶ This article took the animal rights movement as a serious issue -- it made the point that there is no necessary opposition between persons concerned with the rights of animals and persons concerned with scientific and intellectual pursuits.

Have you heard from the people who handle the animals -- the technicians for example?

We have not heard from these people, Yet, I think these are the people who could most readily identify with the animals. I'd certainly like to hear from them. Maybe I will, if they find out that there is a movement that addresses some of the things they do during the day that may make them uncomfortable.

One of the things we've tried to do is increase the parameters of the visible. The people who work in the labs could help with this: The public has a right to know what science does for us, and the people who work the closest to it could be the ones who give the public the opportunity to learn what goes on a day-to-day basis.

In what way?

By using those professionals who are capable of letting people know what's happening -- the press, your publication, people who are concerned for animals. My name is listed in the Manhattan telephone directory.

Any last words?

I feel that connecting with your readers is enormously important, and hope that, rather than a clash of concerns, we can find common ground. Formerly, scientists thought that they must disregard qualms about the fate of their experimental subjects because there was no other way. This is probably no longer the case. Non-intrusive science is likely to be more imaginative, more elegant, and to produce more relevant data.

We feel that scientists who take serious account of these issues can initiate new, productive departures in biological science.

Results Of The Campaign

M. C. Bergerac, chairman and chief executive of Revlon, and Rodney W. Nichols, executive vice president of The Rockefeller University in New York City, announced 23 December 1980 that Revlon will fund a three-year, \$750,000 research project, focusing on the development of a Draize test substitute. Dr. D. M. Stark, head of the lab animal facility at Rockefeller and director of the new program, said his first goal is hiring a research team.

Bergerac called upon other leading cosmetics companies to join Revlon in supporting the research. Roger Shelley, vice president of corporate affairs for Revlon added that donations from the humane and animal rights groups concerned by the use of the Draize test would also be welcomed.

Asked if the animal rights publicity campaign had anything to do with Revlon's decision to fund research, Bergerac said, "I think we'd have been foolish to ignore it. But it's wrong to say we're doing it because of the campaign -- it was not the major reason."

With urging from Avon, the Cosmetics, Toiletries and Fragrances Association (CTFA), the industry trade group, created a Test Systems Task Force on alternatives last April. (Avon has already changed its test protocols in an attempt to reduce the amount of pain.) To help eliminate duplication in testing, the CTFA is compiling a computerized list, by chemical composition, of already tested materials.

The CTFA task force also held a conference in Washington last October to discuss options in eye irritancy testing. It was agreed that the test should be modified and that research projects should be developed. No one, however, was encouraged to come up with actual proposals, according to Spira.

The task force held a meeting in early December to review the conference papers and a number of research proposals CTFA had received in the mail. The task force had come to no conclusions at press time, said Norman Estrin, vice-president of science at CTFA. On May 8, 1980, the Consumer Product

Safety Commission (CPSC) suspended routine in-house use of the Draize test while it studied the use of anesthetics in the test. This moratorium is still in effect. The Rose Sheet, a newsletter for cosmetics and fragrance industry executives, stated that the moratorium was the result of pressure on federal regulatory agencies by the Coalition.¹⁰

The Coalition has recently contacted the soap and detergent trade association and the chemical manufacturers association. Spira says these associations sent their toxicologists, not their public relations staff, to meet with the Coalition representatives, and he sees this as a sign that the Coalition is being taken more seriously.

REFERENCES

1. *Illustrated Guide for Grading Eye Irritation Caused By Hazardous Substances*. U. S. Consumer Safety Commission, Washington, DC 20207.
2. Smyth, D. H.: *Alternative To Animals In Research*, Scalar Press, London, England, 1978.
3. Letter from Leonard Rack, MD and Henry Spira to Frank S. Johnson, Revlon, Sept. 10, 1978.
4. Weil, C. S., Scala, R. A.: Study of intra- and inter-laboratory variability in the results of rabbits eye and skin irritation tests. *Tox. and Appl. Pharmac.* 19: 276-360, 1971.
5. Rowan, A. N.: *The Draize Test: A Critique and Proposals for Alternatives*, Institute for the Study of Animal Problems, Washington, DC, March 1980.
6. Wade, N.: Animal rights: NIH cat sex study brings grief to New York museum. *Science*, 194(4261): 162-166, Oct. 8, 1976.
7. Cosmetics firms feel heat over the Draize test. *Chemical Week* pp. 18-19, Sept. 10, 1980.
8. Annual Report of Research Facility, Revlon Research Center, Inc., signed by Irwin J. Lebish, DVM, Oct. 25, 1978.
9. Singer, P.: *Animal Liberation*, Random House, New York, 1975.
10. Draize test alternatives and modifications being investigated by CFTA's new test systems task force, VP-science Estrin reports. *The Rose Sheet* FDC Reports, Inc., Washington, DC, 1(7): 1, June 16, 1980.

Recommended Citation:

Harriton, L. (1981). Conversation with Henry Spira: Draize test activist. *Lab Anim*, 10, 16-22.