



*Cari Colleghi,*

*ricevo dai Colleghi Berlucchi e Marzi un documento che ci dovrebbe senz'altro fare piacere. Charles Darwin, in una sua lettera, mette in chiaro qual'è il ruolo della sperimentazione animale e il valore delle discipline fisiologiche, con parole e giudizi che non danno adito a dubbi. A più di un secolo di distanza, questi sono ancora temi attuali e ineludibili. Sono ovviamente cambiati i protocolli sperimentali ma la ricerca fisiologica, in tutte le sue forme, ha ancora un ruolo centrale tra le discipline biomediche. E mi piace ricordarlo in buona compagnia, con Charles Darwin!*

*Un caro saluto , Vostro*

*Fabio Ruzzier*

*MR. DARWIN ON VIVISECTION.*

The following letter has been addressed by Mr. Charles Darwin to Professor Holmgren,<sup>1</sup> of Upsala, in answer to a request for an expression of his opinion on the question of the right to make experiments on living animals for scientific purposes—a question which is now being much discussed in Sweden:—<sup>2</sup>

"Down, Beckenham, April 14, 1881.

"Dear Sir,—In answer to your courteous letter of April 7 I have no objection to express my opinion with respect to the right of experimenting on living animals. I use this latter expression as more correct and comprehensive than that of vivisection. You are at liberty to make any use of this letter which you may think fit, but if published I should wish the whole to appear. I have all my life been a strong advocate for humanity to animals, and have done what I could in my writings to enforce this duty. Several years ago, when the agitation against physiologists commenced in England, it was asserted that inhumanity was here practised and useless suffering caused to animals; and I was led to think that it might be advisable to have an Act of Parliament on the subject. I then took an active part in trying to get a Bill passed, such as would have removed all just cause of complaint, and at the same time have left physiologists free to pursue their researches—a Bill very different from the Act which has since been passed. It is right to add that the investigation of the matter by a Royal Commission proved that the accusations made against our English physiologists were false.<sup>3</sup> From all that I have heard, however, I fear that in some parts of Europe little regard is paid to the sufferings of animals, and if this be the case I should be glad to hear of legislation against inhumanity in any such country. On the other hand, I know that physiology cannot possibly progress except by means of experiments on living animals, and I feel **the deepest conviction that he who retards the progress of physiology commits a crime against mankind.** Any one who remembers, as I can, the state of this science half a century ago must admit that it has made immense progress, and it is now progressing at an ever-increasing rate.

"What improvements in medical practice may be directly attributed to physiological research is a question which can be properly discussed only by those physiologists and medical practitioners who have studied the history of their subjects; but, as far as I can learn, the benefits are already great. However this may be, no one, unless he is grossly ignorant of what science has done for mankind, can entertain any doubt of the incalculable benefits which will hereafter be derived from physiology, not only by man, but by the lower animals. Look, for instance, at Pasteur's<sup>4</sup> results in modifying the germs of the most malignant diseases, from which, as it so happens, animals will in the first place receive more relief than man. Let it be remembered how many lives and what a fearful amount of suffering have been saved by the knowledge gained of parasitic worms through the experiments of Virchow<sup>5</sup> and others on living animals. In the future every one will be astonished at the ingratitude shown, at least in England, to these benefactors of mankind. As for myself, permit me to assure you that **I honour, and shall always honour, every one who advances the noble science of physiology.**

"Dear Sir, yours faithfully,

"CHARLES DARWIN.

"To Professor Holmgren."

<sup>1</sup> Frithiof Holmgren (1831-1897), Swedish physiologist and professor of Physiology at Uppsala.

Darwin's letter was reprinted in [Nature](#), the [British Medical Journal](#) and [Jesse 1881](#). The letter provoked a response on 19 April in the *Times* by Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), Anglo-Irish journalist and founder of the Anti-Vivisection Society in 1875. Darwin responded to Cobbe with a second letter to *The Times* on 22 April ([Darwin 1881](#)).