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ALAN BARNETT PHOTOGRAPHY



Neuroscientist Nikos Logothetis is a director at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics, where he used to run a primate laboratory.

ANIMAL EXPERIMENTS

Scientists criticize handling of animal-welfare charges

Some researchers are upset about how Germany's prestigious Max Planck Society has reacted to a penalty order issued to a leading neuroscientist.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

Scientists at one of Germany's leading neuroscience institutes say that their employer, the Max Planck Society (MPS), is failing in its responsibility to defend them against efforts by animal-rights activists to disrupt research.

The researchers outlined their criticisms in two letters to MPS leadership seen by *Nature*, and in interviews.

Their concerns relate to the MPS's handling of a struggle between activists and Nikos Logothetis, a world-renowned neuroscientist who has been a director at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics (MPI-Biocyb) in Tübingen since 1996. An expert in visual perception, Logothetis studies how the brain makes sense of the world, and used to run a primate laboratory at MPI-Biocyb.

The MPS, which has an annual public budget of €1.8 billion (US\$2.1 billion), is

Germany's most prestigious research organization, and runs 84 institutes and facilities.

The struggle began in September 2014, when a German television channel aired footage taken by an undercover animal-welfare activist who had infiltrated Logothetis's lab, purporting to show mistreatment of research monkeys.

Death threats and insults to Logothetis and his family followed — and in 2015, Logothetis decided to wind down his primate lab and ▶

► replace it with a rodent facility.

Events came to a head on 20 February this year, when a district court in Tübingen announced that it had issued Logothetis with a ‘penalty order’ — an accusation of a minor offence combined with a fine, which automatically becomes a conviction if it is not appealed — for allegedly violating animal-protection laws. Logothetis denies the charges and immediately appealed. The appeal will be heard in court, but a hearing date has not yet been set.

ANIMAL BAN

After the penalty order was announced, the MPS leadership removed Logothetis’s overall responsibility for animal research at MPI-Biocyb, and banned him from conducting experiments with animals and from supervising others doing animal work. MPI-Biocyb scientists take issue with the MPS’s decision to impose these sanctions on Logothetis before the court hearing.

“We are very upset that the society is failing to uphold the principle of innocence before guilt is proven,” says neuroscientist Hamid Noori, a junior group leader at MPI-Biocyb. “With this attitude, any activist can attack us freely, without consequence.”

Noori is one of four MPI-Biocyb scientists who spoke to *Nature* about the situation. Their criticisms are echoed in the two letters: the first, sent in December, was signed by 54 scientists; the second, sent in February, was signed by 94, who make up the majority of those who work with animals at MPI-Biocyb, says Noori.

The February letter describes “an extremely distressful situation” that “has seriously compromised our working conditions”.

MPS president Martin Stratmann says that the society, a publicly funded body, was justified in restricting Logothetis’s responsibilities because it “must uphold public trust that animal research is carried out properly”. Stratmann adds: “Any public perception that animals are being treated incorrectly will damage the image of animal research as a whole.”

He says that he has met with staff to listen to their concerns, and that “there has been constant support for the Logothetis department and for Nikos Logothetis personally in the last years.”

Stratmann also says that he has made several public statements on the need for animal research in general and primate research

in particular. But since 2014, Logothetis has claimed that the MPS’s expressions of public support have not gone far enough.

The affair has caught the attention of the broader neuroscience community. “From the outside, it looks like the Max Planck Society is abdicating its duty to stand up for its scientists,” says neuroscientist Bill Newsome at Stanford University in California, who co-chaired the US National Institutes of Health BRAIN Initiative when it was announced in 2013 by then-president Barack Obama. He says that the MPS “gave a negative message” by announcing sanctions before a verdict has been reached by the court.

The penalty order follows contradictory judgements about Logothetis and his work. Immediately after the September 2014 documentary was broadcast, an external specialist appointed by the MPS leadership found no welfare violations at MPI-Biocyb. But two months later, the German Animal Welfare Federation, a non-profit organization in Bonn, filed multiple complaints with police

“Our work was stopped and started, we were subjected to a lot of uncertainties.”

in three rhesus monkeys, the judge offered an out-of-court settlement, which Logothetis accepted. But in October, the state attorney general in Stuttgart asked prosecutors in Tübingen to reconsider the settlement decision. They pursued the delayed-euthanasia case against Logothetis and two other staff members, who have not been publicly named, leading the court in Tübingen to issue all three with penalty orders in February.

Logothetis says that the decisions about whether and when to kill the monkeys, which contracted infections after surgery, were appropriate and complied with the law. Veterinary staff attempted to treat the infections, he says, and two of the monkeys recovered. The third was humanely killed when staff decided that it was unlikely to recover.

WORK PROBLEMS

Scientists at MPI-Biocyb say the MPS’s handling of the saga has affected research. In October 2017, Stratmann cancelled a visit

of the institute’s external scientific advisory board weeks before it was scheduled to happen, because of the ongoing case against Logothetis.

As a result, says chemist Goran Angelovski, a project leader at MPI-Biocyb who signed both letters to the society, scientists at MPI-Biocyb have not obtained the formal critiques of their work on which they rely to get promotions, or their next positions.

“The board’s report would have given us an evaluation, and that’s what we really need for our careers,” he says. The short-notice cancellation also meant weeks of wasted work, according to those who signed the first letter.

Stratmann says that he takes these concerns very seriously, and that “preparations are currently ongoing to organize an evaluation.” The preparation work for the cancelled visit can be used for this upcoming evaluation “to a large extent”, he adds.

RODENT PLANS HALTED

There have also been other disruptions, say scientists at MPI-Biocyb. In December last year, the MPS announced that Logothetis would lose his responsibility for animal research if the court were to issue him with a penalty order, and that the society was halting its plans to build the rodent-research facility as a result of the ongoing case. In January, the MPS announced that building work on at least a part of the facility would go ahead.

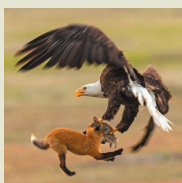
But these decisions sparked a period of disruption that has damaged productivity, says Henry Evrard, a neuroanatomist at MPI-Biocyb. “Our work was stopped and started, we were subjected to a lot of uncertainties,” he says.

Stratmann says that Logothetis remains the scientific head of the institute’s department of physiology of cognitive processes, and is still “able to plan, analyse and publish experiments”. “The MPS has not taken away Nikos Logothetis’s capacity to conduct research,” he says. He emphasizes that the elements of the rodent facility that have been approved for construction are “very extensive”.

Logothetis stresses his gratitude for the funding generosity of the MPS, “which offered me truly the whole universe”. But he has appealed to a labour court for return of his full management responsibilities. “I need to clear my name,” he says. ■



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CORRECTION

The News story ‘Scientists criticize handling of animal-welfare charges’ (*Nature* **558**, 13–14; 2018) stated that Nikos Logothetis was indicted on 20 February for allegedly violating animal-protection laws, and that a court had not yet considered those charges. In fact, on 20 February, the public prosecutor in Tübingen announced that earlier in the year, the district court had issued Logothetis with a penalty order — an accusation of a minor offence combined with a fine, which automatically becomes a conviction if the accused does not appeal — for alleged mistreatment of animals. Logothetis immediately appealed. The appeal will be heard in court but no date has been set. The story also said that Stuttgart prosecutors had overturned an earlier settlement granted by the Tübingen court and pursued the case against Logothetis, leading to the indictment. In fact, the Stuttgart attorney general asked Tübingen prosecutors to reconsider their settlement decision, and it was these prosecutors who pursued the case, leading to the penalty order.