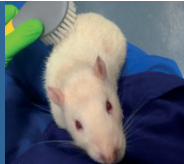


Scratchy that itchy away!

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Introduction

- Rats at a small facility at the University of Cambridge were groomed with an ordinary pet brush and a selection of soft toothbrushes.
- Not all facilities are able to do this due to time restrictions and/or biosecurity measures.



- The rat scratcher has been designed to be used within all facilities with a view to be able to fit any cage design.
- This device is most beneficial when there may be lack of opportunity for the rats to be groomed by cage-mates, for example; if they are singly housed for experimental reasons.



- The device has been designed with inspiration from the cow scratcher which is extremely popular in the farming industry and are used to encourage natural behaviour and improve well-being (Kerbl, 2019).
- Also rat tickling research has arisen the question as to whether being groomed or having the opportunity may have the same positive effect as being tickled. As it appears that rats enjoy being tickled and will seek out the hand of the tickler (Makowska & Weary, 2013), so it would make sense that they would also enjoy a rub and a scratch.
- The design for this device was entered into the Janet Wood innovation award competition 2019 and won 1st place.
- As a result it has been produced by Datesand and was officially launched on 3rd September 2019.
- The device has been trialed at a few of the facilities across the university for a short period of time.

Results and Discussions:

- The rat scratchers were placed into the cages and the rats were observed for their reactions
- The rats investigated the device and were keen to sniff and rub their faces against it. However, some of the rats in other facilities did not really pay attention to the device.
- To encourage the rats to use the device, I used the rat scratcher to brush along their backs and the sides of their faces.

- When grooming the rats with the device I was able to observe other behaviours that may not normally be seen in laboratory rats such as bruxing, also called chattering, this is when they grind their teeth together, and eye boggling, this is where their eyes pop in and out of their eye sockets. Both of these behaviours are a sign that the rats are relaxed and content (Pet Partners, 2016).
- At present we have not been able to observe the rats actively using the device. This may be a result of the strain, age or perhaps even that they were already housed in a group.
- One of the facilities used a chocolate nut spread on the device to encourage the rats to interact with it (see photos above and below). This was very successful as the rats were happy to lick this off.



Conclusion:

- The rat scratcher is a good enrichment device with multiple uses.
- The trial of this piece of enrichment has given us the opportunity to learn where improvements need to be made and where further investigation is needed.
- As there has been limited opportunity to observe the rats with the device, further investigation of this is needed. Investigation is also needed to find out whether the device improves the welfare of the rats.
- The further research will be carried out by recording the rats whilst they are in their natural wake time at night and look at behaviours along with other indicators of positive emotions using facial expressions (Finlayson et al. 2016).

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