

# A second opinion

**Sebastien Farnaud sees parliament's revision of the animal testing directive as a unique opportunity to replace animal experiments with more reliable techniques**

In November 2008, the European commission published its proposal to update the 24-year-old directive on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes. After nearly a quarter of a century and following the successful development of non-animal alternative methods, the final proposal is expected to be adopted this year.

The Dr Hadwen Trust for Humane Research, a leading UK medical research charity that funds non-animal research techniques, sees this as a unique opportunity for the replacement of animal experiments by more advanced and reliable techniques.

Although the regulation of the use of animals in research is often considered as a primarily scientific issue, public opinion wants legislation to focus on meaningful improvements for animals, ultimately replacing their use with more advanced and humane methods.

In a European opinion poll in 2009, 81 per cent of respondents agreed that the new law should prohibit all experiments causing pain or suffering to primates. Furthermore, 79 per cent believed that it should prohibit all experiments on animals that do not relate to serious or life-threatening human conditions, and 84 per cent agreed it should prohibit all experiments causing severe pain or suffering to any animal. In May 2009, following the parliament's vote on the proposed amendments, the commission's proposal failed to retain its promising vision, with only some positive outcomes.

MEPs rejected some very scientifically relevant amendments such as a mandatory central authorisation, and the scientific and ethical evaluation of all animal experiments before an animal-use licence is granted. They also rejected strict limits on re-use of animals and retrospective ethical review for all experiments. Despite the 2007 written declaration commitment to vote for a phase-out of primate use over time, MEPs voted against it and a phase-out of F1 primates (offspring of wild-caught parents). Restricting the use of monkeys to avoid their use in experiments with no direct medical application was also rejected.

Fortunately, some positive changes can still be expected. The creation of new EU and member state facilities to develop alternatives methods was supported, with the extension of

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the remit of ECVAM (European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods) for the development of alternatives in all areas of research. This will provide the necessary incentive for developing new alternatives, which rarely occur by serendipity. Also agreed was the establishment of an upper limit of pain which was further defined by experts in July 2009. MEPs further agreed to a widening of the scope

of the law to include basic medical research, and also some invertebrate and foetal animals scientifically shown to experience pain and suffering.

A ban on the use of great apes was agreed but unfortunately subject to the use of the safeguard clause in exceptional circumstances. Such a measure should have no negative impact on medical progress since the use of non-human primates has been shown in numerous scientific publications to have been of little or no predictive value to human medicine. An increase in data-sharing, subject to the safeguarding of confidentiality, was supported to prevent duplication of failed animal experiments together with waste of economic and human resources.

The concern of potential loss of collaboration and competitiveness with non-EU countries is difficult to substantiate. Since the final adopted changes in the directive will be based on scientific and ethical principles, they should be adopted by the non-EU countries that embrace the same high standards in research. However, economic concerns should not be the primary factor dictating legislation, which even if adopted by other countries, might not fit the European scientific and ethical requirements.

Despite delays introduced with the adoption of the Lisbon treaty, it can be expected that following the discussions last December, an agreement could be reached early this year. The Dr Hadwen Trust is confident that our European representatives will not ignore public opinion and fully embrace a more advanced scientific and ethical future for scientific research. ★



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