

Expectations of Animal Welfare Organisations in Europe

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Animal experimentation has always been an issue of particular concern to the animal welfare community. By definition, in this field of animal use, in contrast to others, pain, suffering or distress is deliberately and systematically inflicted on sentient animals. The history of opposition to animal experimentation is as old as animal experiments themselves, but scientific approaches to reduce, refine or replace such experiments have only emerged 50 years ago. Particularly after intense societal debate, making animal experiments a truly political issue, and resulting legislation on national and international level in the 1980s, some success could be observed and particularly became evident in the decreasing numbers of animals recorded in the regular statistics on animal experiments. However, this progress has stopped around the year 2000, and the numbers have begun to rise again. What are the reasons for this development that seems to counteract all the efforts animal welfare organisations, scientists, and decision-makers have put into this issue? Apart from the dramatic numbers of animals that are used in gene technology related fields, one can be seen in the slow development of alternative methods in contrast to the fast growing number of applications of animal experiments, especially in the light of increasing interest in better protection of humans and the environment from unwanted effects of new substances and products. The EU chemical legislation (REACH), is a perfect example of this dilemma. While science and its methods have enormously advanced in both aspects, technically and conceptually, it seems that many animal experiments still follow scientific principles that stem from the beginning of the last century. The mere fact that these methods have been used for decades for certain purposes, such as risk assessment, seems to be a sufficient justification for regulators and politicians to cling to these. The tradition of *in vivo* techniques seems to be a stronger driving factor than the exploration of new scientific pathways and concepts which could replace such use. This is also true for basic research. While an abundance of new scientific questions, new substances, new products, new technologies and new regulations has emerged over the time, existing animal experiments have persisted as a method, independent of whether they can be regarded appropriate to respond to these new challenges.

In addition to this it has become obvious that existing legal demands on animal experiments are not enforced to a satisfactory extent. The provision that an animal experiment must be indispensable and ethically justified, which is in the core of most legal requirements in animal research, is obviously not met in a significant proportion of animal use in science.

To overcome these problems, several measures are needed, such as:

- Legislation regulating animal experiments has to be revised in a way that allows for realisation of the fundamental ethical principles underlying that legislation.
- More efforts must be put into the development and application of alternative methods. This concerns resources, acceptance processes, and particularly coordination of the various activities on national and international level.
- On national and international level, a coherent strategy is needed to approach the issue. Among other things, testing requirements in different fields need to be harmonized – e.g. alternatives that have been validated for a particular use have to be made available for other types of uses.
- Research funding bodies should not give new incentives to animal use by asking for new animal “models” to investigate particular questions, and instead promote the use of non-animal methods.

The revision of the EU animal experimentation Directive 86/609 is a historical opportunity to respond to the societal concern of animal protection in research and testing and implement at least some of the above mentioned approaches.