

The BfR-ZEBET Funding Program of 3Rs Research in Germany

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Since now for some 20 years ZEBET provides funding to promote novel and innovative projects and approaches at German universities and research institutes committed to refine, reduce or replace animal experiments. Compared to the initial funding budget of around € 200,000 (400,000 Deutsche Mark) in 1990 the budget has doubled to approximately € 400,000 in 2009 . Due to this special federal financial support dedicated to the 3Rs, altogether more than 100 projects in the field could be “picked-up” and fostered from their very early beginnings, mostly at a stage where no proof of concept had been available at the time.

Still, compared to other national and international funding programs the financial volume is rather small. It is therefore the main objective of the BfR-ZEBET program to concentrate on initial and time-limited funding of highly novel and rather risky project proposals to enable innovative scientists to develop their ideas and to produce experimental data for subsequent support by larger funding programs, like the priority program "Methods to replace animal experiments" of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), the EU Framework Programme or direct funding by ECVAM and Industry (e.g. COLIPA).

The projects accepted encompass a wide range of experimental approaches, including cell culture techniques, organ cultures or bioreactors that mimic *in vivo* situations. In addition, the development of software programs for statistical data analysis and *in silico* tools for the prediction of potential toxicity of chemicals, were supported and some of them are now successfully applied worldwide.

Many of the researchers who enjoyed support from the ZEBET fund between 1990 and 2009 have achieved honourable distinction through prestigious national and international research awards for their contributions to the 3Rs principle. It is also this international recognition of supported projects and scientists that underpins the importance of this program for initiation and development of alternatives to animal experiments over the last two decades.