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Laboratory research: limit animal testing without hampering scientific progress say MEPs

For obvious ethical reasons, the use of animals in scientific experiments needs to be limited and their welfare improved. But this must be done without hindering research in Europe into fighting diseases, says the European Parliament in a legislative report adopted by MEPs in Strasbourg.

Around 12 million animals are used for scientific research in the EU every year. This number should be reduced to a minimum and any planned tests subjected to compulsory ethical assessment, to take account of the public's concerns, according to a draft directive that has been approved under the co-decision procedure by the European Parliament and the EU Council of Ministers.

MEPs today adopted in plenary, by a majority of 540 to 66, with 34 abstentions, a first-reading report by Neil Parish (EPP-ED, UK) broadly backing these goals.

"We all want to see animal tests reduced. However, European citizens quite rightly demand the best and most effective medicines", Mr Parish said. "The Parliament report makes it clear exactly when testing on animals should be allowed and under what circumstances. It strikes a compromise between ensuring that research can continue in the EU and improving animal welfare", he added.

Great apes to be used only to conserve the species

In particular, MEPs endorsed a ban on the use of great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans), who are threatened with extinction, except for experiments intended to conserve these species.

However, some aspects of the proposal, which would drastically restrict the use of primates such as marmosets and macaques, could penalise European research to the advantage of its American or Asian competitors, which are less strict on animal welfare. The House therefore amended the directive to make it better balanced and enable medical research to go ahead.

At the same time it suggested measures to promote alternatives to animal testing.

Using fewer primates without compromising the fight against serious diseases

The report rejects the idea that tests using non-human primates should be restricted to "life-threatening or debilitating" conditions, as this would seriously hinder research into, among other diseases, some forms of cancer, multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer's disease. It points out that other European and international guidelines require that some drugs be tested on primates before they are approved, and says that tests using these animals should continue to be allowed in medical research as a whole. Also, the Commission should conduct a review of the use of non-human primates in scientific experiments every two years after the entry into force of the directive.

Feasibility studies before animal captures are halted

Press release

MEPs support the goal of putting an end to the capturing of wild animals (F0 colonies, in the jargon) by using second-generation specimens born in laboratories (F2) instead, but views differ over the possibility of setting up such colonies in the near future. MEPs therefore want the Commission to carry out feasibility studies to check whether the supply of animals will be enough for EU research purposes. Meanwhile they believe a transition period of ten years is needed instead of the seven years envisaged by the Commission.

Classification of the severity of tests

MEPs also adopted amendments to clarify the text of the legislation, giving definitions for the three categories of pain inflicted during a test ("up to mild", "moderate" or "severe"). To avoid repeated suffering, the Commission wants to allow the same animals to be re-used only if the test entails pain classed as "up to mild". MEPs, however, believe that applying criteria that are too strict would result in even more animals being used for tests, which would defeat the object. They therefore ask for animals to be re-usable if the test entails "moderate" pain. This would include blood tests or implants performed under anaesthetic.

More effort to devise alternative methods

One of the key features of the directive on reducing the number of tests on animals is the development of alternative methods. However, the directive is unclear about the role in this area of the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods. MEPs believe the centre should be expanded to give it a genuine role in coordinating and promoting the development and use of methods that can replace animal testing. They add that the Commission and Member States must provide material support for the development of such new experimental approaches.

More transparency without increasing red tape

Other amendments seek to spell out the requirements for transparency regarding any tests performed and to prevent red tape which would bring little animal welfare benefit.

In particular, MEPs want the prior authorisations required for animal tests to be limited to projects where the pain would be "moderate" or "severe" or to those carried out on primates.

Also, they do not want the directive to cover larval forms and embryonic or foetal forms other than mammals, because of the complications of counting and recording the thousands of eggs laid by some female fish or amphibian species.

The text approved by MEPs stresses that the directive will not prevent Member States from applying or adopting stricter national measures to improve the well-being and protection of animals used for scientific purposes.

Next steps after the elections

Owing to end-of-legislature calendar constraints, it has not been possible to conduct talks with the Council of Ministers with a view to reaching a first-reading agreement before the European elections in June. It will therefore be up to the newly-elected Parliament to confirm or amend the outgoing Parliament's position and negotiate with Member State representatives in order to conclude work on this directive.

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