

Issue Overview: Animal testing

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Activists dressed as animals protest outside the headquarters of the Ministry of Science in Brasilia, Brazil, March 14, 2014. The posters read in Portuguese "Free yourself of Cruelty." Animal activists handed tens of thousands of signatures to the ministry calling for a ban on animal testing for cosmetics. Photo: AP Photo/Eraldo Peres

An estimated 26 million animals are experimented on each year in the United States. Animals are used to develop medical treatments and medicines. They are also used to check the safety of commercial products, such as cosmetics and shampoos.

Supporters say animal testing has led to the development of many life-saving treatments for both humans and animals. They say there is no other way to research how new products will affect humans, and that strict rules keep animals from being mistreated in laboratories.

Opponents say it is cruel and inhumane to experiment on animals. They say that researchers can use other methods instead and that animals are so different from humans that the results often are useless.

Regulations

The federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA) was passed in the U.S. in 1966. The AWA defines "animal" as "any live or dead dog, cat, monkey, guinea pig, hamster, rabbit, or such other warm-blooded animal."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that in 2010, 1,134,693 animals were used for testing, according to the AWA definition. It doesn't include farm animals, reptiles, or rats and mice that were bred for research.

The USDA breaks down its information by three categories of pain: animals who experience pain but are given drugs to relieve it; animals who experience pain and are not given drugs; animals who do not experience pain.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates the development of new medications. It requires that drug companies test new medications on at least two species of animals to determine if they are safe.

Public Opinion

In 1965, Sports Illustrated magazine published a story about a pet dalmatian that was kidnapped and sold into experimentation. It sparked the anti-testing and animal rights movements in the U.S.

A May 2013 Gallup poll found that 56 percent of Americans said medical testing on animals was morally acceptable. That was down from 65 percent in 2001. A total of 39 percent said it was wrong.

Younger Americans are less likely to support animal testing, with only 47 percent of people aged 18 to 34 saying that animal testing is acceptable. In contrast, 60 percent of people aged 35 to 54 and 61 percent of people aged 55 and older say it is OK.

Early History

Ancient Greek writings described experimenting on live animals from as early as 500 B.C., about 2,500 years ago.

The Roman physician and philosopher Galen dissected living animals in the 2nd century. He wanted to see how living creatures worked.

English doctor William Harvey experimented on living animals in the 17th century. He discovered that the heart, and not the lungs, circulated blood throughout the body.

Animal Testing In The 1800s And Early 1900s

In the 19th century, more people began adopting pets. The anti-vivisection movement grew, primarily in England. Vivisection means dissecting live animals. In 1875, a group started the Society for the Protection of Animals Liable to Vivisection.

In 1865, French scientist Claude Bernard, who supported animal testing, argued that experimenting on animals was acceptable because of it helped medicine and extended human life.

Queen Victoria was an early opponent of animal testing in England. Soon, the anti-vivisection campaign became strong enough to pressure lawmakers into establishing the first laws controlling the use of animals for research.

In 1959, scientists William Russell and Rex Burch published "The Principles of Humane Experimental Technique." It laid out the "Three Rs" for using animals in research humanely: Replacement, which means using alternative research methods that don't involve animals; Reduction, or minimizing the use of animals whenever possible; Refinement, which means reducing suffering and improving animals' living conditions. The "Three Rs" are part of the AWA and are the basis of many international animal welfare laws.

The Modern Debate

In 1975, Australian philosopher Peter Singer published "Animal Liberation." He wrote that humans are not superior to animals, and so it is not right to hurt, torture or test on animals. Singer predicted that future generations would be horrified and shocked by the way we experimented on animals, and the conditions we kept them in.

In 1981, the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) discovered that monkeys were being kept in horrendous conditions at a Maryland lab. The animals were so stressed that they were tearing their own flesh. The laboratory's director was charged with more than a dozen animal cruelty offenses.

A 2007 report by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences called for a reduction in animal testing. It recommended testing on cells, instead. It did say that testing on animals would continue for a while longer, because cells cannot stand in for an entire creature.

In 2013, the European Union banned the sale of makeup that had been tested on animals. The United States still allows this testing. China is the only major market where testing all cosmetics on animals is required by law.

The U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) stopped breeding chimpanzees for research in 2007. In 2013, it announced that it would retire most of its chimpanzees — 310 in total — over the next several years. The decision was welcomed by animal rights groups, but opponents said it would have a negative impact on the development of important vaccines and treatments. In 2015, the NIH announced that its remaining 50 research chimpanzees would be sent to the Federal Chimpanzee Sanctuary System.

Source: animal-testing.procon.org