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Briefing: Animal Experimentation

It is estimated that on average 115 million animals worldwide are used and/or killed in the name of science every year. The UK is one of the largest animal testing countries in the world and, the statistics show, the largest in Europe using at least 3 million animals every single year.

In the UK, animal experiments have to be licensed by the Home Office if they “may have the effect of causing that animal pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm”. Such experiments can involve animals being poisoned, deprived of food, water or sleep, applied with skin and eye irritants, subjected to psychological stress, deliberately induced with disease (including painful cancers), brain damaged, paralysed, irradiated, burned, gassed, force fed and electrocuted.

All animal experiments cause pain and suffering to varying degrees. The animals involved will either die as a result of the experiment or will be deliberately killed afterwards, often for post mortem examination. Regardless of the kind of experiment they are involved in, animals suffer impoverished lives in tiny cages with little or no enrichment, or freedom to roam and express their natural instincts.

Researchers around the world use animals to test or develop almost anything from household products, cosmetics and food additives to pharmaceuticals, industrial chemicals, agrochemicals, pet foods, medical devices, tobacco, alcohol and other recreational drugs.

Animal experiments are very seldom a legal requirement; there are a very few cases where the law actually stimulates animal experiments but usually the law simply requires that a company submits a certain amount of test data before a product can be marketed without dictating the method by which this data is acquired. Because animal tests have been conducted for so many years and the regulatory authorities who require the data are predisposed to accept data from animal studies rather than non-animal techniques, the system of product development, regulation and marketing has become inextricably linked with animal experiments. Nonetheless, in the UK only 11% of animal experiments were conducted for these purposes

There are many alternatives to using animals and momentum in this area is growing. We can use cells or tissue grown in the test tube, imaging machines, computer models and volunteer studies. The alternative to not using animals is not harming patients or vulnerable people. It also doesn't mean halting medical progress.

Statistics

In 2007, the UK used over 3,125,826 animals in 3,201,581 procedures. This was an increase in both animals and procedures of over 6% on 2006. Animals used included:

- 31,547 guinea pigs
- 13,280 rabbits
- 5,648 dogs
- 179 cats
- 281 horses
- 3,125 monkeys

Over 60% of tests in the UK are conducted without the use of local or general anaesthesia, and even where it was used very often the animal are allowed to recover and suffer post-operative effects.

Only 21% of research is for testing new human medicines.

Only 11% of all procedures are conducted to satisfy medicines, chemical or safety regulations

36% of UK project licences using animals are categorised as ‘mild’ but this can include taking blood samples, fitting cannulas, skin irritation tests and taking biopsies.

59% of experiments are categorised as ‘moderate’ – this can include toxicity tests in which animals are fed or dosed with high concentrations of chemicals or drugs as well as many different types of (multiple) surgery and brain damage, include strokes, Parkinsonian symptoms and inability to self-care

‘Only’ 2% of project licences are categorised under the highest category of ‘substantial’ severity, which means

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'a major departure from an animal's usual state of health or well-being'. These include experiments such as those to create full-blown Parkinson's disease in monkeys and where it is anticipated the animals may die from the effects of the study such as in shellfish poisoning and Botox batch testing.

Since Labour came to power in 1997, the number of animals used in experiments has risen by 21%