Arguments Against Animal Testing

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Animal tests are unethical

The use of live animals in experiments is not only cruel, but also unreliable and ineffective. We believe there is no rational moral justification for using animals in experiments.

Animals used in laboratories are deliberately subjected to stressful, painful and/or harmful procedures, against their will and not for their own good and are usually killed when they are no longer considered useful.

Animals are sentient beings, which means that, like people, they experience pain, suffering, well-being and happiness. They have their own individual needs and interests that deserve respect and should not be exploited as mere tools for human benefit.

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Animals are different

Animals do not naturally get many of the diseases that humans do, such as major types of heart disease, many types of cancer, HIV, Parkinson's disease or schizophrenia.

Instead, signs of these diseases are artificially induced in animals in laboratories in an attempt to mimic the human disease. Such experiments downplay the complexity of human conditions which are affected by wide-ranging variables such as genetics, socio-economic factors, deeply-rooted psychological issues and different personal experiences.

Animals also respond very differently to certain types of products than humans do. For example, anyone who has a dog will know that while chocolate, grapes, raisins, avocados and macadamia nuts are all harmless to humans, they are toxic to dogs.

Similarly, Aspirin is toxic to many animals and would not be on our pharmacy shelves if it had been tested according to current animal testing standards. Also, the most commonly used species of monkey to test drug safety (Cynomolgous monkeys) is resistant to doses of paracetamol (acetaminophen) that would be deadly in humans.

Even variations between humans makes it difficult to extrapolate from one human sub-population to another. For example, your skin might be able tolerate a certain face cream that causes your friend to break out in hives or you might be able to consume a food product that makes your family member very ill. So how can we expect animals, from an entirely different species, to be a reliable basis for predicting the likelihood of specific effects in humans?

Animal tests are unreliable

Animal tests notoriously lack reliability. Repeats of the same tests often produce conflicting results and effects in animals do not reliably predict human outcomes.

Animal tests often produce misleading results, wasting limited resources that could have been better spent on methods and approaches that are actually relevant to humans.

Many tests on animals have never been shown to provide reliable or relevant information and yet they have become established as the standard, regulatory tests which are routinely performed in support of the safety and efficacy assessments required by law. In contrast, non-animal methods for regulatory toxicity testing are rigorously evaluated to ensure that they deliver the accurate information needed to protect against harm and have been proven to outperform the established older animal-based test methods.

For example, when evaluating the potential for substances to cause a skin sensitisation reaction – as is commonly performed when checking ingredients across a wide range of consumer products – by comparing the performance of the test methods against the known real-world effects on humans, it has been proven that more modern non-animal approaches outperform the older, most routinely used animal test.

Animal tests are unreliable

Continued support for the use of animals in medical research and drug development is not backed up, we believe, by the available scientific evidence. Despite many decades of studying cancer, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, stroke and AIDS in animals, none of these conditions have reliable and fully effective cures, and some don't have any effective treatments. A shocking 92% of medicines currently fail in human clinical trials even though they passed preclinical tests (including animal tests); 55% of failures are due to lack of efficacy while 28% are due to toxic effects in humans.

This general failure rate is bad enough, but for drugs aimed at treating complex and poorly understood conditions, failure is almost a certainty (e.g., the failure rate of drugs intended to treat Alzheimer's disease is estimated to be higher than 99%). As a result, only a handful of novel medicines are released onto the market every year and withdrawals and warnings of adverse effects commonly follow as the drug is essentially tested by the wider population.

In any other industry, this level of failure would be considered unacceptable and unsustainable. The profound inefficiency of animal tests to predict safety and efficacy outcomes in humans coupled with the huge cost (over $2 billion) and time (10-15 years) required for new treatments to reach the market is causing patients and society to suffer.

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Animal tests don't guarantee safety

Not only are time, money and animals' lives being wasted (with a huge amount of suffering), but safe (and effective) products are being mistakenly discarded and, worse still, harmful products are getting through after animal tests have provided false assurances of safety.

In fact, our research has shown that using dogs, rats, mice and rabbits to test whether or not a drug will be safe for humans provides statistically little useful insight. Our study also revealed that drug tests on monkeys – considered the 'least different species' to humans – are just as poor as those using any other species in predicting the effects on humans.

It is therefore not surprising that misleading results in animal tests have led to terrible tragedies. For example, an arthritis drug called Vioxx was found to be safe when tested in monkeys (and five other animal species) but caused around 320,000 heart attacks and strokes and resulted in 140,000 deaths worldwide.

In 2006, human volunteers testing a new monoclonal antibody treatment called TGN1412 suffered a severe allergic reaction and nearly died. Testing on monkeys at 500 times the dose given to human volunteers totally failed to predict the dangerous side effects.

A 2016 drug trial in France resulted in the death of one volunteer and left four others severely brain damaged. The drug, which was intended to treat a wide range of conditions including Parkinson's disease, was tested in mice, rats, dogs and monkeys before being given to humans.

In another example, despite early recognition that a widely used fragrance called Lyral causes allergic skin reactions in humans, regulatory action to ban the substance from cosmetics in Europe was severely delayed in part due to tests on animals having indicated that the substance is only a moderate skin sensitiser.

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Animal tests are not essential to progress

Scientific breakthroughs have come about despite animal tests and many of the commonly cited ‘breakthroughs’ in animals have been overhyped while the contribution of previous research in humans have been downplayed.

For example, we are often told that insulin therapy would not have been discovered unless animal researchers had removed the pancreas from dogs in the 1920s, but the important clues actually came much earlier from observations of human patients. Similarly, brain surgery in Parkinson’s patients identified the best place for Deep Brain Stimulation electrodes to be placed in the brain to improve symptoms, decade before the ‘discovery’ in monkeys.

Had we decided decades ago to move away from unreliable and irrelevant tests on animals and towards modern, human-relevant methods instead, we would likely have seen many more developments by now.

Because animal experiments do not provide definitive data about effects in humans, their relevance is often disputed when it is convenient to do so. For example, several of the COVID-19 vaccine candidates were progressed to human trials despite disappointing and/or ambiguous results in animal tests. This raises the question of whether animals are truly useful and necessary to inform drug development. Researchers seem to cherry pick which data they want to focus on and which they want to ignore, depending on the situation.

Though animal tests remain the default and – in some cases – a legal requirement (e.g. medicines), a shift to non-animal approaches would likely bring about a faster pace of innovation. Animal testing has had more than a fair chance to prove itself; it’s time to evolve and make way for the future.

The use of animals in science can be complex and varied, and views often differ. The content of this briefing represents Cruelty Free International expert opinion, based on a thorough assessment of the evidence.

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