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Meeting Offers Hope for Fewer Animal Tests

By IVER PETERSON, Special to the New York Times

April 12, 1987

PRINCETON, N.J., April 10— Efforts to use fewer animals for testing the safety of chemicals and consumer products are progressing, but they are still facing important technical and regulatory obstacles, according to top industry scientists.

A meeting here Thursday of officials who head toxicology research at a dozen major corporations was in itself an indication of the increasing importance that companies place on changing testing practices, said an animal rights advocate who participated.

The company officials, who have been pressed by the rising costs of animal testing programs, by Congress and by a small but active movement for the humane treatment of laboratory animals, agreed on a need for more sharing of information about alternatives to animals in safety tests.

The meeting was sponsored by the Mobil Oil Corporation, whose huge research campus is near here. Among the participants were top health and environmental scientists from Procter & Gamble, Exxon, G. D. Searle, Monsanto and DuPont.

"I don't think you could have had a meeting like this five years ago or even two years ago," said Henry Spira, a principal organizer for the Animal Rights Coalition.

Dr. Myron A. Mehlman, head of toxicology testing for Mobil, and the organizer of the meeting, had nice things to say about a movement. "The animal lovers are very good friends of ours," he declared after the meeting. "Why? Because they make us think." The lack of animosity between Mobil and the Animal Rights Coalition pointed up the hopes of both sides for action by another party, the Federal Government. Representatives from the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, agencies that between them order thousands of animal tests, acted as brakes on the optimism of some participants that technological alternatives would someday eliminate or greatly reduce the dependence for experiments on live animals.

The Federal officials argued that while clearly unnecessary tests were being eliminated, evolving medical and environmental trends gave rise to pressure for more animal testing, not less.

"There are tremendous forces on regulators every day to use more tests and more animals," said Dr. Theodore M. Farber, director of the toxicology branch at the environmental agency.

Advocates of reduced testing have argued that some procedures now performed with live animals could instead use cells or bacteria in a laboratory dish. But in an interview, Dr. Farber said: "You can't ask a cell to do arithmetic for you or tell you about its memory or operate in a maze - you just can't get that kind of test from a single cell test." Progress Is Reported

Other promising branches of research include computer models of the biological effects of chemicals and the use of the retina of embryonic chicks to replace live rabbits for testing the effects of chemicals on eyes. In all cases, the thrust of efforts to reduce the role of animal testing is to move down the

evolutionary scale, from primates to lower animals, from mammals to fish, from fish to tissue cultures, bacteria and single-cell organisms.

Several companies at the meeting reported progress in these directions.

Mobil, for example, is seeking several patents for a bacteria-based test for the presence of known carcinogens in petroleum distillates. "We can do an assay in hours that would have taken years to do" with animal tests, said C. R. Mackerer, the Mobil scientist who developed the system.

The participants agreed that the standard test for determining the lethal dose of a chemical, the Lethal Dose/50 test, which determines the dosage at which 50 percent of the test animals die from it, takes more animal lives than necessary. They said the use of bacteria and cell cultures can often provide the same information.

A bill to forbid Federal agencies from requiring the LD/50 test in determining a product's safety or labeling requirements has gained numerous co-sponsors in the House of Representatives.

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