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Spira Letter on Animal Testing

Henry Spira

Animal Rights International

To the Editor:

While sensationalism—baboons vs. babies, mice vs. cancer patients, animal activists trashing labs—may be front-page news, it is certainly not the only news. What is not generally known, or reported on, is the tremendous progress that has been achieved by scientists and animal-rights activists working together. As a society, we do not have to choose between animal and human welfare.

For example, the oldest and most widely used animal test is the Lethal Dose 50% (LD50) test, which measures how much of a chemical, per body weight, kills half of groups of 40 to 200 animals. Ten years ago, there was near unanimous agreement within the scientific community that the classic LD50 was needed. Now, there's almost unanimous agreement that the classic LD50 is unnecessary. This change in perception was not due to new discoveries. For decades, a small group of toxicologists had challenged the scientific merits of this painful death test. Yet it was animal activists who disseminated information on alternatives to the classic LD50 throughout the scientific community. This helped achieve the recent consensus that 90% fewer animals coupled with more sophisticated analysis, yields more relevant toxicological information.

Similar moves towards alternatives are taking place throughout industry. Mobil, for example, has implemented a computerized system that permits 95%-98% of new formulations to be approved without new animal testing, and has replaced much traditional chronic skin-cancer testing on animals with the Mobil Modified Ames bacterial test. Similarly, Noxell and Avon have replaced their Draize rabbit eye irritation testing with high-tech non-animal tests.

And the National Cancer Institute has implemented a new in vitro screen that has reduced the use of animals from six million to less than 300,000 annually, while improving the quality of candidate anti-cancer agents.

It is ironic that, at a time of significant progress, sectors of the media still highlight sensational confrontation. These stories may attract attention, but they also polarize public opinion and obscure the tremendous gains of the past decade.

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