

Declaration:

Political activities jeopardize Healthcare in Switzerland – animal studies are slowly but steadily being prohibited

Animal rights group activities aiming to massively restrict studies in biomedical science and medical progress are going to inflict serious damage on Switzerland as a centre of research. They are attempting to marginalize animal research on several levels at once:

1. A new federal popular vote initiative seeks to ban both animal studies as well as clinical research and development of new medicines in patients. In addition, it aims to prohibit the import of medicines that have been developed with the aid of studies in animals and humans.
2. A parliamentary initiative is calling for a ban of animal studies with the highest severity level. This despite the fact that Switzerland already has the strictest animal health standards and animal welfare regulation in the world. All animal experiments must be assessed by an independent cantonal Animal Experiment Committee and can only be approved if the dignity of the animal is respected and the gain of knowledge outweighs the experimental burden (weighing of benefits against harm).
3. For some time now, there has been a tendency to increase the severity level of a large number of experiments, even for routine procedures that have been in use for years. The reasons behind these changes are not communicated and are not scientifically justified. Most of these studies concern research using mouse models for human diseases, which would be immediately prohibited if the above-mentioned parliamentary initiative were accepted. This would destroy the foundations of research on many complex diseases which is of fundamental importance for the development of new medicines and treatments.
4. In Basel, a cantonal initiative has been submitted that seeks to confer basic human rights to all primates - even mouse lemurs, a primate species on the same physiological and anatomical level as mice. But these rights would only apply to those primates that reside in public-sector institutions (universities), not to those in private laboratories or in the zoo. The University of Basel does not even have any primates. This initiative could not be more absurd and senseless!

Studies in animals pose an ethical challenge for research scientists, politicians and society as a whole. In research, we use animals as models to understand the human organism and thus study the basic mechanisms underlying disease; the same applies to research in pet and livestock animal diseases. But experiments in animal models are also required by law to test new therapies, medicines and vaccines before they are used for the first time in humans or animals. Without these clinically relevant studies in animals, there would be countless serious adverse events and patient deaths. It must be clear to everyone that this risk is massively reduced by prior studies in animals – an important reform introduced, by the way, as one of the results of the Nuremberg Trials following Nazi rule in Europe.

Studies in animals are just a small part of a life science research project. They are ALWAYS embedded in a research strategy with coordinated steps and methods that also involve analysis of human and animal cells or tissues, bioinformatics and even mathematical simulations of biological processes on the computer. If animal studies were prohibited, the entire research strategy would collapse, because studies in cells and tissues and also computer simulations can only partially represent the complexity of the living organism, if at all. It would mean the end of life science and medical research; Switzerland's position as a research centre would be ruined.

Although animal rights groups repeatedly claim the opposite, studies in animals are still indispensable and will remain so for the foreseeable future. We Swiss research scientists do all we can to keep our animals in a manner appropriate to their species and ensure that the studies are conducted in a way that is as sparing and as pain-free as possible for the animals. Studies use only as little animals as needed to obtain conclusive results.

Our primary objective is the avoidance of human suffering. Thanks to decades of research activity, a great number of diseases can be treated today, not only in humans but also in the livestock animals and pets entrusted to us.

Who can still remember the smallpox and polio epidemics of the past which are no longer a threat to the lives of our children thanks to vaccines – developed also with the aid of animal experiments? Who is still familiar with the heart-breaking images of children suffering from diabetes and ultimately starving to death because food was restricted to prevent further shock conditions? Anyone suffering from diabetes today leads a largely normal life with an average life expectancy – thanks to the discovery of insulin in animals and to research on further treatment approaches in animals. The successes in both human and veterinary medicine as a result of animal studies would fill an entire book series – and yet still it is repeatedly claimed that animal research is of no benefit!

Despite this long list of successful research projects implemented in clinical practice, there is still a lot of work for Swiss research scientists to do: still no treatments or medicines have been found for Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases, and we still cannot reverse serious spinal cord injuries. Although biomedical research has led to a massive increase in the life expectancy of most cancer patients, and many can even be cured, there are unfortunately still aggressive cancers with extremely short life expectancy. Intensive research is still needed to defeat these and many other incurable diseases. This research depends on animal models that allow the complexity of these diseases to be studied in the live organism. And we are working around the clock, doing our best, to ensure that this research benefits patients – whether human or animal.

For all these reasons, it is irresponsible and ethically unjustifiable to further restrict – and thus steadily ban by stealth – all studies in animals knowing that patients are suffering.

As a result of the current initiatives and slow but steady ban on animal experiments, the Animal Welfare Act is also being undermined by organizations that were involved in drafting the legislation. We raise our voice in protest against this, and demand that the provisions of Swiss Animal Welfare Act be observed and that research involving studies in animals stays possible in Switzerland on the basis of the current legislation. If amendments to the act or to pertinent ordinances are necessary, this should be discussed and decided with the involvement of the research community. We call on the authorities, politicians and society to support our efforts and to safeguard the future of biomedical research and life science in Switzerland, since these are crucially important pillars of the innovation and economic output of this country. Do not let our medical and economic future be needlessly called into question.

The following organizations and universities support this declaration (proposals):

Research for Life (RfL)

Basel Declaration Society (BDS)

Focus group on animal experiments at reach - research and technology in switzerland