

Reports and Comments

UK Government announces plan to reduce the use of animals in scientific research

The UK Government recently published a delivery plan to reduce the numbers of animals used in research building on the commitment it made to this aim in 2010. The introduction sets the context for the plan, emphasising the continuing need to use animals in research for applied purposes such as the development of new medicines and medical technologies and for the protection of the environment. Pure or blue skies research is not, however, mentioned despite the fact that the basic research is a permissible purpose under UK and European legislation. Having made a case for the continued use of animals in research, the plan then addresses the need to reduce animal use through the development of better and more relevant animal models of disease and tools that replace, reduce or refine the use of animals in research.

Specifically the Government has indicated that it intends: i) to advance the use of the 3Rs within the UK; ii) use international leadership to influence the uptake of the 3Rs; and iii) address the need for openness by emphasising the need to promote understanding and awareness about the use of animals where no alternatives exist. Approaches identified in the document include adoption of good practice and training, the development and use of alternatives, the requirement to reassess the need for research in specific areas, and refinement of animal models, endpoints and animals care. All of this is to be carried out within the Government's strategy to make the UK the location of choice for research, development and related manufacturing.

The document lists a number of initiatives that are either planned or underway under each of the main strategic priorities and repays reading in detail but there are several points worth noting here. First, although the title only refers to reducing the numbers of animals in scientific research, the document covers Refinement as well as Replacement and Reduction. Second, although reduction of animal use is a major aim, no figures are given as a reduction target. This may annoy some but reflects the reality that identifying ways of reducing animal use is usually best done within a defined piece or area of research and predicting future needs for animal use is always difficult and sometimes impossible. Third, is that government funding for the NC3Rs will increase from £5.3 million in 2010/11 to just over £8 million in 2014/15 reflecting the fact that the NC3Rs, (a partially government funded but independent body) is identified as a major player in the plan. On the other hand, although many of the action points identified in the plan fall to the NC3Rs, other bodies are also involved including UK Government offices such as Defra and the Home Office (the latter being responsible for the regulation of animal research in the UK); research councils; government centres of research; and welfare organisations. Finally, the Inspectorate is tasked with dissemination of 3Rs information to Licensees. This has been a function that they have carried out over many

years, and one that some stakeholder groups have considered important.

Not all of the initiatives to advance the 3Rs identified in the document are new. Nonetheless, the plan is useful, not just as a demonstration of the Government's political will in this area and as a management tool with identified targets, timelines and dates for review; but also because it provides examples of 3Rs' approaches that should be useful to other countries and organisations interested in finding ways of minimising the suffering of animals used in research.

Working to Reduce the Use of Animals in Scientific Research (February 2014). A4, 41 pages. Home Office, Department for Business and Skills, Department of Health, UK. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277942/bis-14-589-working-to-reduce-the-use-of_animals-in-research.pdf.

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Guidelines for behavioural research

LASA (Laboratory Animal Science Association), BAP (British Association for Psychopharmacology), BNA (British Neuroscience Association) and the ESSWAP Foundation (European Courses in Whole Animal Pharmacology) have jointly produced a set of guidelines with the aim of helping researchers, particularly those new to the field, who plan to carry out behavioural studies on animals for biomedical purposes. The guidelines have been developed with the participation of professionals working in the field, and while this helps ensure credibility, as the authors acknowledge, it has resulted in a bias towards neurological and pharmacological procedures. Consequently, the authors consider these guidelines to be a first pass at the issue, and that subsequent editions might cover either more topics, or expand the detail of existing ones. Despite their concerns, much of the advice presented is valid for many types of research using animals.

The guidelines are split into seven sections: The 3Rs and ethical evaluation; Justifying behavioural studies of laboratory animals; Choosing the procedure; Training; The animal; The environment; and The experiment and the data. Some readers will find some of these sections more useful than others or may wish to refer back to a particular section, and so it is helpful that the sections are colour-coded. The document is full of good advice such as the need to consult statisticians at an early stage, the importance of various aspects of the environment, including that experienced prior to the research, and the need to consider strain and other animal characteristics. While some of this advice is also given in other publications this does not detract from the importance of this document as new readers may not be familiar with older publications. Many behavioural models in biomedical research are used widely, and almost routinely. It thus becomes easy to use a model rather uncritically, so one recommendation, that is very obvious but