

LETTERS

Animal experimentation in Lithuania

Sir,

Although there is no antivivisectionist movement in Lithuania, the public are concerned with issues concerning the use of animals in research and education. The Lithuanian Laboratory Animal Science Association (Lith-LASA) was established in 1996 (Simkeviciene *et al* 1998) with the aim of improving experimental animal science. The State Veterinary Service Department now has animal welfare officers in all 54 administrative units of Lithuania and is able to control the use of animals.

In recent years, legislation and regulations for the protection of experimental animals have been proposed and accepted in many Eastern European countries. In order to achieve the standard required for both high quality research and the humane use of animals, substantial efforts to organize the relevant legislation have also been made in Lithuania. State law and regulations now affect the use of animals in research. These include the following important documents: *Lithuanian Republic Law on Animal Care, Rearing and Use (1997)*; *Veterinary Regulations on Breeding, Handling and Transportation of Laboratory Animals (1998)*; and *Requirements for the Use of Laboratory Animals in Scientific Experiments (1999)*.

One very important step, from a legal point of view, was the establishment of the Ethics Commission in 1999. Its members, who represent 10 State institutions and two public ones (Lith-LASA and the Society for Animal Protection), have prepared requirements for the evaluation of research protocols. These are based on clear and precise guidelines concerning the scope and criteria to be used in reviewing research, application of the 3Rs, assessment of animal pain and distress and finding a balance between animal harm and human benefit. Based on the conclusions of the Ethics Commission, the State Veterinary

Service decides whether or not to issue licences to perform experiments on animals.

Adequate education and training are the main prerequisites for ensuring a high quality of research and responsible use of experimental animals. Since 1997, a special course on laboratory animal science has been run at Vilnius University. With the assistance of Scandinavian colleagues and Lith-LASA, courses for the education and training of scientists working with laboratory animals have also been organized in Lithuania since 1996 (Ruksenas & Simkeviciene 2000).

The 3Rs, described by Russell and Burch, are widely espoused in Lithuania (Simkeviciene & Laukaitis 1999). In recent years, there has been a slight reduction in the number of experimental animals used in Lithuania. This reduction depends to a large degree on non-scientific factors such as the legislative control of research, and availability of funding. We think that the recent decrease in experimental animal use in Lithuania was also influenced by the following factors: the reorganization of scientific institutions and their research programmes; the possibility of buying standardized animals; the use of alternative methods; and improved qualifications of researchers.

In general, we consider that the use of animals in research, teaching and experimentation is improving and is controlled in Lithuania.

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