

Opinion: It's time to stop product and science testing on animals

Mark Hawthorne April 24, 2024



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Science has given us many marvels. Electricity immediately springs to mind, as does the telephone. The remarkable ease with which we're able to trace our ancestry is utterly astounding, and I have no doubt enjoyed more than my fair share of instant oatmeal. I am grateful to science for these and so many other life-changing wonders.

What I cannot abide, however, are scientific advances achieved through the pain and deaths of animals.

Wednesday is World Day for Animals in Laboratories. On this day, animal advocates commemorate the suffering of millions of mice, rabbits, dogs, fishes, monkeys, pigs and other animals used in research, product testing and medical training. (The day is observed on April 24 to honor antivivisectionist Hugh Dowding, who was born in Scotland on this day in 1882.)

Humane Society International estimates that more than 115 million animals worldwide are used in laboratory experiments every year. These animals are beaten, blown up, burned and blinded. They are starved, suffocated, shaken and shot. They are nailed down, tied up and sliced open.

They are forced to inhale tobacco smoke, drink alcohol and consume a variety of highly dangerous narcotics, including heroin. They are infected with diseases, sickened with toxic chemicals and injected with lethal pathogens. Their organs are pulverized, their limbs are severed, their bodies are irradiated and their spirits are broken. Nearly all these animals are killed after the experiment.

Animal testing is one of the most contentious practices in our society, pitting scientists and researchers against animal advocates and a growing population of compassionate consumers.

Since we share a large percentage of our genes with mice, chimpanzees, dogs and other vertebrates, scientists have commonly assumed that these animals are good models of human biology and that whatever harms them will also harm us.

The dangerous reality, however, is that there exist many disparities between the animal models and the human condition, and this translational inaccuracy can result in deadly failures. Four young boys perished after participating in a gene therapy trial in 2020, for instance, and three adults died in 2022 after taking an experimental drug for Alzheimer's disease called lecanemab.

Indeed, according to the FDA, 92 percent of the drugs that prove safe and therapeutically effective in animals fail in clinical trials using humans. One study published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the world's largest funder of biomedical research, found that of 93 dangerous drug side effects, only 19 percent could have been predicted by studies using animals.

I can already hear the "Yes, but ..." defenses: Animal experiments save so many human lives; we can't find cures without animal testing; animal models give us medical advances and promising treatments; et cetera.

It is true that animal testing has led to benefits for humans; it would be disingenuous to suggest otherwise. But there are humane alternatives to animal testing that do not require the exploitation of animals.

In February, Monica M. Bertagnolli, director of the NIH, announced that they plan to prioritize "novel alternative methods" of research that do not rely on animal testing. "These complementary, non-animal-based approaches hold tremendous promise," she wrote on X.

Such alternatives include in vitro testing, which involves conducting experiments in controlled laboratory environments using human cells or tissues or sophisticated cell culture systems; organoids, which are three-dimensional miniaturized versions of organs or tissues that are derived from cells; organ-on-a-chip technology, an in-vitro micro-scale biomimetic platform that helps in reproducing physiological environment of human organs; and artificial intelligence, which can analyze vast data from computational models and predict drug interactions.

And let's not overlook the role of human volunteers in testing the safety and efficacy of new treatments or products. Micro-dosing, for instance, involves administering small drug doses to volunteers, affecting cells without causing major physiological effects and helping to identify nonviable drugs.

We have a moral obligation to animals. The NIH's announcement — coupled with the passage in 2022 of the FDA Modernization Act 2.0 allowing drug developers to use non-animal methods to test for safety — gives me hope that humanity is edging ever closer to a day when we are no longer subjecting these sentient beings to pain, emotional suffering and death in laboratories.

Please contact your members of Congress and urge them to support the Humane Cosmetics Act, H.R. 5399, legislation that would prohibit animal testing for cosmetics manufactured or sold in the U.S. [Click here](#) for more information.

Hawthorne serves on the board of Save the Buns, a nonprofit that provides sanctuary and finds loving homes for rabbits who have been rescued from product-testing and research labs, and is the author of "Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering."