



FRAME response to the latest Home Office statistics on laboratory animal use

Important changes to reporting will provide more information

FRAME is delighted that changes in the reported statistics of laboratory animal procedures in Great Britain will enable better understanding of exactly how animals are used in bioscience research. Greater detail will allow better planning to reduce reliance on inadequate animal-based models and help bring about introduction of more-relevant, human-based replacements.

Scientists in the UK who work with animals are required by law to submit reports to the Home Office about their use, and the figures are collated and released annually by the department. Statistics issued today (October 22), for procedures carried out during 2014, have been altered in line with EU policy.

FRAME is dedicated to the development of new and valid methods that will replace the need for laboratory animals in medical and scientific research, education, and testing. Scientific Director Dr Gerry Kenna said: "It is vital that we prioritise the introduction of more relevant, scientifically valid alternatives to animal-based tests and research models in order to find new and better drugs and treatments for human diseases.

"These new statistics will help us identify where efforts can be concentrated in order to minimise, and ultimately replace, current animal models, and especially those that bear little or no relevance to human biology."

A total of 3.87 million procedures were completed in 2014. 1.94 million were connected to creation and breeding of genetically modified animals that were not used in any further experiments. The majority of experimental procedures (60%; 1.16 million) were carried out on mice and 14% (264, 000) were on fish.

Changes

Some key changes to the reporting are: actual levels of severity of procedures, the types of legislation under which procedures take place, more detail of the place of birth of animals used – in particular non-human primates, and altered information on genetic status.

Severity

FRAME is particularly pleased that scientists must now report actual severity levels imposed during their research, rather than predicting potential harm in advance. This will give a much more accurate picture of the impact that experimentation has on animals and will enable targeted refinement of the most severe procedures. Of the 1.93 million experimental procedures carried out 25% (483,000) were classified as moderate and 8% (150,000) were assessed as severe. This is a matter for deep concern.

Dr Kenna said: "The idea that a third of procedures carried out have caused animals to be markedly distressed or in pain is disheartening. FRAME would like to see no procedures above the mild classification."

Legislation

The new statistics will report more detailed information on what type of legislation requires animal tests (e.g. medical device legislation or biocides legislation) and the origin of the legislation (e.g. to satisfy EU or non EU regulations). This is important for identifying areas of high regulatory use, and to provide opportunities to challenge those requirements and work with legislative authorities to encourage development, validation and acceptance of alternatives.

Place of birth

More detailed information on the origin and breeding of animals will give important insight into parameters that can have a high impact on their welfare. This is especially important in the case of non-human primates because their wellbeing is already compromised by captivity and procedures. Knowing how far the animals have to travel to laboratories and how domesticated they are in terms of captive breeding will enable a more accurate prediction of the cumulative harms they encounter.

Genetic status

The statistics have revealed that half of the animals used in 2014 were for the purpose of creating and breeding genetically altered animals, but were not themselves used for any experimental purpose. Of this total, 2% (34,000) procedures were classified as severe and 4% (74,000) were judged moderate. This represents in excess of 100,000 animals who suffered pain and/or severe distress, irrespective of any experimentation, and raises substantial concern.

Other points

Dog use

Overall the figures show a 14% decrease in dog use. The majority of dog procedures were for regulatory purposes, including toxicity and safety studies. Procedures classified as moderate or severe were carried out on 803 animals. FRAME is concerned about continuing use of dogs for this purpose because they are of limited value in human safety assessment and are a poor model for human adverse reactions to many drugs and other substances.

Dr Kenna said: "FRAME will continue to campaign against the breeding and use of dogs intended for toxicity testing."

Overall totals

There has been an apparent fall in the number of procedures carried out in 2014 compared with the previous year. This cannot be taken as a positive sign because it could be a result of the changes to the reporting regulations.

Dr Kenna said: "If the change marks a trend in animal use it is to be welcomed, but we must be cautious of too much optimism, because of the reporting changes."

NOTES

FRAME is Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments. FRAME's vision is a world where non-animal methods are accepted as scientific best practice.

For further information see www.frame.org.uk

For further comments call 0115 958 4740

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FRAME is the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments.

It promotes the replacement of laboratory animals with non-animal methods, through better science.

Its ultimate aim is the elimination of the need to use laboratory animals in any kind of scientific or medical procedures.