EBRA Bulletin

Produced by the European Biomedical Research Association

November 2007

ARTICLES

CONTACT INFO

tel +44 7990 906145

email matfield@ebra.org

postal address
25 Shaftesbury Avenue
London W1D 7EG
United Kingdom

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Draft Directive may be published early in 2008

The draft directive has now entered inter-service consultation, one of the final stages before adoption by the Commission and publication

After many false alarms and a wait of several years, the European Commission has announced that the proposal to revise Directive 86/609 is currently in inter-service consultation. This means that the final proposal from DG Environment has been sent to all the other DGs for their views before the text is adopted by the Commission and sent to the European Parliament and the Council. The other Commission services have until 7 December to comment on the text.

After this date, DG Environment will consider the comments and suggested amendments, and undertake discussions with the Commission services who proposed them. This process will take a minimum of three weeks. If changes are substantial, another inter-service consultation will take place. This will last three weeks, after which the text will need to be translated into all Community languages (a minimum of four weeks).

Only at this stage will it be sent to the College of Commissioners for adoption as a formal proposal for legislation, after which it will be made public few days later. The proposal will follow the co-decision procedure, and is likely to be debated in the Parliament and the Council for at least another year, and possibly considerably longer.

"Although EBRA has been heavily involved in the discussions leading up to the production of the draft proposal by DG Environment," said EBRA Director Mark Matfield, "we are very pleased that at long last the proposal should be made public and that scientists and clinicians will have a real opportunity to join in the debate. It's important that the voice of the scientific community is heard loud and strong in support of the need to continue animal research in order to find cures and treatments for the many serious diseases that still beset us today. We want to make sure that the proposed Directive provides for effective regulation, but does not create unnecessary restrictions, delays or bureaucracy."

Parliament adopts Written Declaration on

primate research

After a great deal of lobbying by animal protection groups, enough MEPs signed the second Written Declaration on primate research for it to be adopted

On 6 September 2007 the European Parliament adopted Written Declaration 0040/2007, after it was signed by a majority of MEPs. The declaration called for "a timetable for replacing the use of all primates in scientific experiments with alternatives." Shortly afterwards, it was covered in the trade press under titles such as "Europe moves towards primate ban"

However, this does not mean that the use of primates will be banned in Europe. Written Declarations are not part of the legislative process and are simply an expression of opinion. Any MEP can put down a Written Declaration on any subject and then ask others to sign it. MEPs are usually willing to sign these declarations simply because they do not have any real effect. If over 50% of the MEPs sign a declaration it is 'adopted' – ie read into the minutes of the parliament and a copy is sent to the European Commission. That is all.

There was a very energetic lobbying campaign by groups opposed to animal experimentation, repeatedly asking MEPs to sign this declaration. Like many other people, MEPs dislike the idea that primates are used in experiments, mainly because they do not understand why it is necessary and because they think it must involve causing a lot of suffering to chimps and other higher primates. The MEPs would consider the Written Declaration simply as a way of promoting a debate about the issue. Many of them will also have signed declarations calling for more research into cancer, AIDS, and other diseases without realising that in some cases primate research would be essential before treatments can reach the stage of being tested on humans.

When the proposed revision of Directive 86/609 is eventually debated by the European Parliament, no doubt some MEPs will call for a ban on using primates to be inserted into the text. Whether or not a majority of the MEPs will vote for this is unclear. Even if they were to do so, the proposal would be strongly resisted by both the European Commission and the European Council (which is composed of representatives all EU national governments). For anything to become EU law under the co-decision procedure, which will apply to this Directive, it has to be accepted by all three bodies: Commission, Council and Parliament.

Although the adoption of this Written Declaration makes it clear that primate research is going to be a major issue of contention with the revised directive, there have been some positive effects as well. The adoption of this declaration has stimulated several organisations representing academic researchers, laboratory animal scientists and industry to start lobbying MEPs to inform them about the importance of animal research, the role of primates and the high standards of welfare applied to all animal research within the EU.

Meeting about primate research at the European Parliament

A number of academic associations have held a meeting in the European Parliament to inform MEPs about the use of primates in medical research.

In November, four UK academic and research funding organisations held a briefing for MEPs about the use of primates in medical research. Leading scientists from the neurosciences and AIDS research communities spoke at the meeting, as well as patient representatives who described the difference that treatments developed from primate research had made to their life and health.

Against the background of Sir David Weatherall's 2006 report 'The use of non-human primates in research', the speakers informed parliamentarians about which areas of medical science use non-human primates, the way that such research is conducted, the advances that have been made through studies on primates and what the biomedical research community is doing to reduce, replace and refine the use of primates.

Mary Rice to retire

After five years as Chief Executive of EBRA, Mary Rice is retiring.

We were delighted when Mary Rice agreed to join EBRA in 2002 as our Chief Executive based in Brussels. She possesses a wealth of experience both in lobbying and in the field of medical science. Now, she has decided that the time has come to step down from EBRA at the end of this year. We will obviously miss her greatly, but wish her all the very best for her retirement.

EBRA Director Mark Matfield said, "I have greatly enjoyed working with Mary for many years, as her career has spanned many leading organisations. She is very well respected in medical research circles both in Brussels and London and there will be many saddened to learn of her retirement. However, she has worked so hard and so long on scientific public affairs that no-one can deny that she deserves time to relax and enjoy life."

Having started as a journalist, Mary Rice held senior public affairs positions with the Medical Research Council, Association of Medical Research Charities, Federation of European Cancer Societies and Weber Shandwick Brussels before joining EBRA. For the time being, Dr Matfield will take over her responsibilities within the organisation.