

Susan Hayman MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

26 March 2018

Dear Ms Hayman

Re: The Labour Party's Animal Welfare Plan

I am writing with regards to the animal welfare plan released by the Labour Party in February, as a representative of The Physiological Society, which is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1876. Our members work in life sciences in the UK and across the world.

The Labour Party has a proud record on animal welfare and we welcome your commitment to consult on developing the next phase of the Party's animal welfare agenda.

The Physiological Society will always support evidence-led work to reduce harms to animals used in research, and welcomes this opportunity to raise some points of clarification concerning the research-related aspects of Labour's animal welfare plan.

Openness

Issues of animal welfare are of great importance to the public and to all sectors where animals are used. Research involving animals is one aspect of the vital toolkit of techniques used in the pursuit of advances in knowledge and medical capability, and it is incumbent on the biomedical sector to clarify for the public why, when and how animals are used in research.

With this in mind The Society worked with Understanding Animal Research to develop the Concordat on Openness on Animal Research, promoting transparency within the sector. The Society supports openness and honesty about all aspects of animal research, including the procedures and harms as well as the benefits.

Animal 'testing'

The description in the plan of animal research as "testing" of "products" does not reflect the wide variety of purposes for which animals are used in research, including the furthering of biological and physiological understanding. Research involving the use of animals is vital in order to improve veterinary and human medicine, the development and validation of surgical techniques and pharmaceutical agents, the monitoring of effects on animals of our ever-changing environment, and the development of cutting-edge biological techniques such as advanced gene editing and therapy. There is also the risk that using the description of "product testing" brings to mind cosmetic testing of the sort that has been banned in the UK since 1998.

Severe suffering

All procedures carried out on animals undergo a thorough harm:benefit analysis, and procedures rated as "severe" require a stringent justification. However, the nature of "severe" procedures is frequently not

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invasive, and can refer to longer-lasting or repeated moderate procedures. It is regrettably true that to alleviate severe suffering in humans, which can go on for many years, scientists do sometimes need to undertake animal experiments involving severe suffering, albeit that it generally lasts for only days or a few weeks. The ending of “severe” procedures in the UK would be a disproportionate response to perceived cruelty. Furthermore, this action will likely have the unintended consequence of this research moving to countries with less stringent welfare restrictions. This could potentially lead to an overall increase in harm, as well as reducing the strength and effectiveness of the UK biomedical research sector and, eventually, harming the economic contributions of life sciences in the UK.

Export of animals used in research

Our strength in biological research means that many unique genetic strains of animal model are created in the UK and then also used worldwide for investigation into genetic diseases and other conditions. Preventing this through a blanket ban on the export of animals for use in research would cause damage UK research and hence to the UK’s strong life sciences sector. It would also lead to duplication of that research abroad, causing more rather than less welfare cost. By the same token we must not ban animal imports.

Project licensing

Our members work with the Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) within the Home Office to ensure that all research carried out is approved and meets the necessary standards of animal welfare. One step in this process is that institutional Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies must consider and optimise the welfare and ethical aspects of each project prior to submission for a Project Licence.

We, along with the broader research sector, are already working with the Home Office to improve the usability and transparency of the Project Licencing procedure. Work began in 2017 to bring about a full revision of the process, of which enhanced transparency will be one key aspect.

Non-animal research models

All research organisations also support the principles of the three Rs (Replacement, Reduction and Refinement of animals used in research), and are legally required to justify their work in light of these principles. Where appropriate non-animal models exist, these will always be used. While technology is one way we have been able to work towards the three Rs, it is not yet possible for technology to replicate the complexity of a biological organism to produce the robust research and safety data we need to advance our knowledge of living systems and to develop new treatments. Moreover, non-animal models are not appropriate for addressing many veterinary and environmental questions for which the target species needs to be studied.

Animal sentience

Finally, the published plan for animal welfare also addresses the issue of recognising animal sentience. This has already received significant public attention after the discussions related to the EU Withdrawal Bill, and has been considered by Defra with the release of a draft Bill. The Society is happy to share its response to the consultation on the draft Bill, should you wish to see the detail on this issue, but, in brief, this is a complicated area that is not well-suited to being addressed by legislation.

If ‘sentience’ is to be enshrined in legislation then the term must be well-defined according to robust scientific terms, as any ambiguity could in future be seized on for potential legal challenges, forcing the courts to determine retrospectively the definition intended by legislation. That could be very disruptive for research. A simple definition such as “able to perceive or feel things” would lead to significant problems of scope, as basic neurological processes would likely be mistakenly put forward as evidence of sentience. For

example, an involuntary withdrawal reflex in an invertebrate (such as a mosquito) to a change in the environmental surroundings (an “escape reflex” to an approaching rolled-up newspaper) would not be sufficient evidence that it is sentient, or capable of discriminating either pain or pleasure and learning from this experience. Similarly, the definition of “animal” must also have a robust biological basis and remain consistent with existing legislation such as the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. However, an appropriate authority should be able to expand the species covered by definitions of “animal” and “sentient” if and when appropriate scientific evidence is published warranting their further inclusion.

We welcome the Labour Party’s willingness to engage with the research sector to refine its proposals on improvements to animal welfare. The Society would be happy to provide further detail on those points related to the use of animals in a research context and I would welcome your getting in touch with me by emailing policy@physoc.org.

Kind regards,

Professor Lucy Donaldson
Chair, Policy and Communications Committee
The Physiological Society