

# Swiss vote Sunday could restrict animal research

- Referendum backed by activist groups
- Relevance to health must be shown

## London

Swiss biomedical researchers fear that their work with animals could be sharply curtailed if voters next Sunday (16 February) approve a referendum on animal experimentation. The Swiss Animal Protection League is asking voters to support an initiative that would allow animal research only if it can be shown to be directly relevant to human or animal health. Researchers are worried that, if the referendum passes, animal rights groups could disrupt most research with animals by making use of a new right to challenge research projects in court.

Under Switzerland's somewhat obsessive democracy, any proposition backed by more than 100,000 signatures can be put forward for a public vote. The federal government is obliged to give legislative form to propositions carried at public referenda.

Sunday's referendum is not the first on animal experimentation. A proposal for a total ban, put forward in 1985 by Franz Weber, a prominent figure in the Swiss wildlife conservation movement, was thrown out by a large majority. But Sunday's proposition is worded much more subtly. Researchers fear that many Swiss will believe the initiative offers sensible controls on the conduct of experiments and fail to understand its full consequences.

Paul Walter, a University of Basel biochemist and president of the pro-research

group *Arbeitskreis für Gesundheit und Forschung*, says that passage of the referendum places basic research "very much in danger". Even more serious — at least in terms of the Swiss economy — is the effect that the initiative would have on the country's pharmaceutical industry. Switzerland is home for several world-leading companies, including Hoffman-La Roche, Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz. Industry research laboratories account for about 80 per cent of the animal experiments now approved in Switzerland each year.

Heinz Weber, animal welfare officer at Sandoz in Basel, says that his company's research would be seriously disrupted if animal welfare groups could challenge in court the ethics of individual experiments. Drug development is a sequential process, he says, and if certain key experiments are delayed, "then the whole process is stopped". Walter describes the proposed right of legal challenge as "murder for experimentation", saying that work could be delayed for as long as two years while courts deliberate. He fears that extremist groups, as a matter of principle, will challenge virtually every experiment.

Supporters of the Animal Protection League's initiative reject Walter's assessment. Christoph Reinhardt, a researcher seeking alternatives to animal experiments at a private institute based in the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) at Zurich, says the Swiss federal govern-

ment would nominate the organizations to be given the right to challenge planned experiments — and exclude groups likely to abuse the right.

But Alfred Schweizer, animal welfare officer with Ciba-Geigy in Basel, says that there are few moderate animal welfare groups in Switzerland. "If only 10 get the right, then 7 will be extreme. We have to prepare for the worst case."

If the initiative is passed, pharmaceutical companies are expected to begin moving research teams out of Switzerland. Weber says that Sandoz would consider moving projects to its laboratories in Britain, Japan and the United States. Apart from the direct restrictions on research, pharmaceutical companies are also worried by what the initiative implies for commercial confidentiality. If animal welfare groups are allowed to challenge individual research proposals, companies will presumably be forced to release details of their research plans.

Researchers also point out that the initiative contains a sting in the tail: if within five years the Swiss government fails to enact its provisions in a new animal experimentation law, animal research would be banned completely. A spokesman for the Animal Protection League describes the clause as a "time bomb" designed "to tell legislators that they'd better do something about it". But Walter says that enacting new legislation in Switzerland can be ponderously slow; he doubts the legislature's ability to meet the deadline, and says the Animal Protection League's initiative could bring "abolition by a very big back door".

Both sides expect Sunday's vote to be close, and have launched intensive media campaigns. The Animal Protection League has held some 15 press conferences. In response, Ciba-Geigy has decided on an 'open house' policy, inviting journalists and members of the public to tour its Basel laboratories. Schweizer, the company's chief animal welfare expert, argues that the initiative would actually hinder animal welfare. Experiments would still take place, he says, but in countries where animal experimentation laws are more lax than in Switzerland.

Nevertheless, some opinion polls show a slight majority in favour of the initiative. Walter expects support to vary markedly between the 25 cantons that make up the Swiss federal republic. He concedes that cantons with large urban populations are likely to support the initiative, but hopes that the sparsely populated agricultural cantons will come to the aid of the animal research community. Swiss farmers have little sympathy with animal welfare activists, he suggests, and the Animal Protection League has to win support for its initiative from a majority of the cantons, not just a majority of the electorate.

**Peter Aldhous**

## Video lessons for UK drug researchers

### London

A NOVEL interactive video system to train new researchers and technicians in animal care and surgical techniques — before letting them loose on live animals — has been launched by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI). The video system should be a standard component of British drug companies' staff training within 12 months, says David Clough, research director at Roche Products and chairman of the ABPI's animal welfare committee.

The system so far comprises six 30-cm video laser disks, each dealing with specific topics. It can run on a standard personal computer, linked to a video disk player. ABPI claims that its system is the most comprehensive package of its type, and the first to use the relatively

new technology of interactive video.

The system goes a long way towards meeting the requirements of the 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, which made training a central theme. The act also introduced a system of licences to sanction work on specific projects, and by specific researchers. By autumn 1993, the Home Office inspectorate responsible for policing the legislation wants researchers to have completed a training course before they apply for a licence. British drug companies are expected to begin using the system soon. But the cost — £4,000 for the computer/video disk player work station and another £2,500 (plus Value Added Tax) for the six disks themselves — is expected to pose more of an obstacle for academic laboratories. **Peter Aldhous**