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A court ruling
could affect
more than
just macaque
research.

Swiss court bans work on macaque brains

Zurich's two largest institutes are appealing to the country's supreme court after a lower court decided to ban two primate experiments studying how the brain adapts to change. They say that the ban is a serious threat to all basic research that uses animals in Switzerland.

The University of Zurich and the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETHZ) announced on 4 June that their local administrative court had ruled against the experiments on rhesus monkeys that had been approved in 2006 by the Swiss National Science Foundation, a funding agency and the Zurich canton's veterinary office, which is responsible for controlling animal welfare.

The veterinary office decision was challenged by an external advisory committee on animal experimentation, which argued that the proposed experiments would offend the dignity of the animals. The requirement to consider the 'dignity of creatures' was introduced into the Swiss constitution in 2004.

The court did not refer to dignity, but agreed that society was unlikely to see the benefits of the research during the three-year funding period approved, and thus the burden on the animals was not justified. Swiss law requires that the benefit to society must be weighed against the burden to animals before any animal experiment can take place.

"But the court has made a new interpretation of the law which demands immediate benefits — and that's not compatible with any form of basic

research," says Peter Chen, vice-president for research at ETHZ. "It goes beyond the requirement of the law and we have no choice but to contest the decision in the highest court."

The experiments were to be done at the Institute of Neuroinformatics, jointly owned by the two institutes. One experiment, to monitor changes in the cortex during perceptual learning, involved denying test monkeys a drink for up to twelve hours to increase the value of the apple juice reward they would be offered if they learnt a new task correctly. The other experiment, designed to understand the microcircuitry in the cortex, involved sacrificing the animals to follow the microcircuitry microscopically.

The scientists use primates because their brains are closer to the human brain than any other species. "We need to understand the basic biology of our brains in order to be able to successfully treat brain diseases such as Parkinson's," says Kevan Martin, one of the researchers. He says he intends to re-apply for ethics approval, making the value of the research more explicit.

Roger Lemon, a neuroscientist at University College London, UK, says that finding out how brain circuitry works in normal as well as disease conditions is fundamental if new therapies are to be developed for neurological disorders. "A huge amount of the sort of work that Martin and his colleagues do lies behind the breakthroughs in applications we are now starting to see." ■

Alison Abbott

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