

UK 'absolutely committed' to reducing animals used in research

Government stands by pledge but shies away from hard target as number of experiments rises.

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The UK government says that it will intensify steps to reduce the use of animals in laboratory research.

British ministers insisted today that they are still committed to reducing the number of animals used in research, but warned that this might not mean a reduction in the overall number of scientific procedures involving animals.

Science minister David Willetts told reporters in London that the government was “absolutely committed” to the so-called 3Rs of reducing, replacing and refining the use of animals. “This is about the scientific community doing its best whenever possible to reduce and replace the use of animals,” he added. “This isn’t about a numerical target.”

The number of scientific procedures involving animals in the United Kingdom reached a peak of around 5.5 million in the 1970s before dropping to just over 2.5 million in 2000. Since then, however, it has increased to more than 4 million in 2012, and despite the government’s promise in 2010 to “work to reduce the use of animals in scientific research”.

Today’s action plan pledges support for the London-based National Centre for the 3Rs (NC3Rs); to encourage data sharing between animal researchers to minimise duplication; and to increase the role of government inspectors of animal research in promoting the 3Rs. For example, inspectors will give more guidance to researchers on alternative lab technique that do not require lab animals.

Norman Baker, the Home Office minister responsible for animal research, insisted that there was no other country doing as much as the UK to reduce the use of lab animals. He said that the government had already backed work — such as developing non-animal tests for detection of toxins in commercial shellfish — that had led to reductions. Had such work not been done, he added, “we would have a higher number than we’ve currently got”.

Echoing Willetts, Baker said it would be “artificial” for the UK to try and set an overall target for the number of animal experiments, given the global nature of science.

UK animal-rights groups criticised today's announcement. The Nottingham-based Fund for the Replacement of Animals In Medical Experiments said it was disappointed by the lack of targets, while the London-based British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection said it showed that the government was abandoning its 2010 pledge.

Mark Walport, the government's chief scientific adviser, cautioned that the increase in animal-research procedures seen in official statistics was mainly down to an increase in the breeding of genetically-modified animals — whose births are counted as procedures — and not to what might more generally be considered 'experiments', which have remained roughly stable at 2 million per year in the past decade. Walport said that scientists were increasingly transparent about their use of animals, and increasingly sophisticated in how they used them.

Vicky Robinson, chief executive of the NC3Rs, welcomed the report and said progress was being made. "Most people are starting to get it [3Rs] isn't a regulatory tick-box. It's about how we do the best science," she told *Nature*.

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