

World Day for Laboratory Animals

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World Day for Laboratory Animals is an artificially created day, somewhat like Mother's and Father's Day, established in 1979 by the British National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS). The date 24 April was picked as it is the birthday of former NAVS president, the aristocrat and former fighter pilot Hugh Dowding. The event is marked by demonstrations and protests by groups opposed to animal research in many European and North American cities.

Campaigns against animal research have thankfully moved away from nasty criminal enterprises, but they continue as targeted and clever communications and reputation-damaging campaigns. Calendar events, such as World Day for Laboratory Animals, have become important media opportunities for activist groups to promote their anti-research messages. Historically, pro-research institutions and researchers have struggled to respond to these events, often deciding not to comment. Unfortunately, this approach allows the activists to dominate any media coverage of the day, creating a one-sided negative narrative on animal research in the public mind.

The European Animal Research Association (EARA) was set up in March 2014 with the aim of helping to maintain and improve public acceptance and understanding of animal research. Belgium is one of the countries in which we were tasked to work. Belgium, with a population of 11 million people, has a large number of private and public institutions that undertake animal research. The latest figures, as released separately by Belgium's three regions—Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels—revealed that there were collectively 664,472 procedures on animals carried out in Belgium in 2014. Similar to other European countries, over 85% of procedures were carried out on mice, rats and fish.

To ensure that anti-research voices would not dominate the media on World Day for Laboratory Animals, as they have historically, EARA decided to reverse the previous quiescence of research institutions by collaborating with private and public research to proactively release a statement to the media on the benefits that animal research has brought in Belgium. "Why Belgium?" one might ask. The answer is that if we could successfully carry out this project in Belgium, then it could be reproduced anywhere.

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Belgium is a country split along regional lines. As a country it has evolved into a more federal structure: the first Article of the Belgian constitution reads, "Belgium is a federal state, composed of Communities and Regions." As a result, Belgium today has three regions: the Dutch Region, the French Region and the bilingual Brussels-Capital area. Animal research statistics were reported nationally until this responsibility was delegated to the regions in 2014. Public and private research is split across the three regions, and there is limited cross-regional communication or collaboration. If we managed to develop a collective effort in Belgium, then we could potentially accomplish it anywhere in the EU.

We invited public and private research organisations from across Belgium to two meetings at which we discussed the merits of an open and transparent approach toward communication about animal research. As

one of the practical initiatives following on from these meetings, we have worked with interested Belgian organisations to develop a collective response to World Day for Laboratory Animals (<http://eara.eu/en/21-belgian-research-organisations-unite-in-support-of-animal-research/>), and we will continue to welcome Belgium-based research organisations to join this initiative. The statement explains the role of animals in research, and acknowledges the need for transparency and an open dialogue between science and the public. Once the exact wording was agreed upon, the statement was translated into Dutch and French for publication by the undersigned and circulated to the media.

The statement was eventually signed by 24 public and private Belgian research organisations. Ten universities, eight private companies and six public institutes joined the initiative. It received extensive coverage in two major national newspapers. By standing united in their support for animal-research, the signatory organisations could feel encouraged by their strength in numbers. On the side of anti-animal research activists, there were no demonstrations or protests to mark World Day for Laboratory Animals in Belgium, aside from an ongoing online petition. By releasing the statement in support of animal research in Belgium on this day, we ensured that the voice of science was heard in the normally one-sided conversation about animal research.

The Belgian collective response to World Day for Laboratory Animals was a historic event: on a day traditionally set up as an activists' media opportunity, we brought together public and private research organisations from Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels to show a united front in support of animal research. We hope that this first step in openness in Belgium will help to improve public understanding and acceptability of animal research.

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