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# Interview: Henry Spira

Foundation for Biomedical Research

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# Interview: Henry Spira

## SUMMARY

Henry Spira, coordinator of various animal rights coalitions, has been involved in the animal research issue, especially product safety testing, since the 1970s. He was active in the movement to eliminate the Draize test and then turned his efforts toward eliminating or refining the W-50 lethality test. Spira says now he also plans to turn his attention to the treatment of farm animals.

While some animal rights organizations endorse high-profile, confrontational tactics, Spira has worked with government officials, toxicologists and scientists to build consensus on what changes can be made that are acceptable to all involved. Although Spira feels his long-term goals are the same as more radical animal-rights activists, (he hopes for a day when all humans become vegetarians) he has focused on incremental change, on what can be done in the present.

Some may question the FBR Newsletter devoting space to the opinions of someone publicly opposed to positions supported by the Foundation (and its contributors), but we feel it is essential to keep our supporters abreast of arguments made by both sides in this important issue.

**FBR: A lot has changed in the field of product safety testing over the last decade, with the number of animals being greatly reduced. You've been involved with a lot of that. Where do you see it going in the next five years?**

Spira: I think there's a general acceptance of alternatives within the science community, and I think that's going to expand. I think also that there's going to be a change from developing more alternatives toward implementation and harmonization of regulatory requirements, basically to move into the public policy arena. How can we put it into commerce, how can we get it accepted by the regulatory sector and by the product liability sector?

**FBR: So you feel the technology is already there?**

Spira: I think a lot of the technology is there, but there is a problem of validation and interpretation. In Europe, there is a center for validation of alternatives in Ispra, Italy, and that's one of the things that's lacking over here. That's one of the things we would like to see happen, and it's something I've urged onto the science community. It's a need in order to move on to the next step--this idea of both validation and implementation. We also need an assessment, a situation analysis to summarize what's happened to date--what are the successes and obstacles to implementation? We need to develop a plan to overcome the blocks, a lot of which have nothing to do with science but have to do both with regulatory requirements and with bureaucratic inertia. Much of the thinking urges a shifting of gears toward validation and implementation. There comes a point when you have to stop designing and start shipping.

**FBR: Do you think the rate of reduction of animals may slow down? For example, speaking hypothetically, in product safety testing, 80 percent may be eliminated easily, but the final 20 percent would prove to be more essential and harder to replace?**

Spira: First of all, I don't know if that 80 percent *has* been eliminated. It's really difficult to say where things are, partly because there is no tracking mechanism. We've been encouraging an animal utilization survey which would provide a base line against which to measure the decrease or increase in the use of animals for various purposes and an assessment of likely pain. Such surveys are currently done in England, but not in the USA. At this point, nobody has the vaguest idea of the number of animals used. Even when the Office of Technology Assessment attempted [in 1983] to find out, they really didn't have a handle on it. I think it's crucial to have that for a number of reasons: Number one to prioritize what areas to focus on, number two to have a benchmark to see what is happening and where.

Do I think there is going to be a slow-down in reduction? On the contrary, I think there's going to be an increase. There's more talk now of data sharing, there's more talk of harmonization among the regulatory agencies—both U.S. and international--and I think more companies can use the concept of "zero-based" reduction. "Zero-based" is a system in which the entire budget is examined and alternatives evaluated as if it were being prepared for the first time. While this concept is active in some areas, it isn't necessarily across the board. Particularly in academia, I don't think it's had that big an impact.

The fact that the science community accepts alternatives, wants to promote alternatives, wants to use animals only as a last resort, is a good omen, and as the culture continues to change as it has over the past decade, the next step is going to be turning those words into action and implementation. So I am encouraged that there will be an enormous reduction.

**FBR: Do you think that eventually all animal use in product safety testing will be eliminated?**

Spira: I think one can say that in a millennia you'd want to see no living being harmed, whether it's human or non-human. But we're living in the real world, and as long as six billion animals are being consumed as food, I don't think you're going to have a point where there's not even one animal being used. But if the whole science community and the regulators and those involved with product liability move in harmony, then instead of having 20 to 60 million lab animals, we can keep chopping off some of the zeros from the end and wind up with a very minimal number of animals that are being used as a last resort in matters of life and death, and put all the resources into alleviating the pain and suffering of those animals that are being used.

**FBR: What is your view of the relationship between biomedical research and the animal protection movement today? Do you think this relationship is changing or evolving?**

Spira: The last decade has been very encouraging. The science community, like the public at large, recognizes that the pain of animals does matter. And the biomedical community realizes that there is much that it can do. It seems to me that today our major problem with the research community is less one of opposing principles than with the issue of energies and priorities. Scientists are not sadists. Most would want to eliminate the use of animals in research, education and testing. The point of contention is what's possible today and how fast can we move? Certainly, some corporations have moved more rapidly than others--Procter & Gamble, Hoffmann-La Roche, Colgate, Bristol-Myers Squibb have been particularly noteworthy in this regard. In addition to reducing their use of animals, they've also been rather aggressive in

changing the culture of their science department. Some have been active in the public policy arena, interacting with regulatory agencies and the international regulatory community to get them to accept some reduction or replacement. It's enormously encouraging that some of the superstars in toxicology have placed their reputations on the line, publicly stating that some traditional, routine tests serve no purpose in protecting human health and the environment and should be abolished.

**FBR: Some of these very companies are getting bashed by other animal rights groups. What do you say if you are talking to another company--one considering changing its policy--when they see that other companies have done so and yet continue to be targeted?**

Spira: There's no way to guarantee that they're not going to get bashed. On the other hand, if they do get bashed, they're in the best position in the public arena to defend their record. They can say "Look, here's what we've done to date, here's what we're doing now, here's what we're planning to do, and we think this is the best scenario in order to reduce, refine and replace.

**FBR: How do you regard the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing (CAAT)? Do you feel it has been effective in leading the search for alternatives?**

Spira: I think it has played an enormous role in legitimizing and institutionalizing the search for alternatives. It has been key in bringing people together in expanding loops within the science community, and I think it has been a real energizer. But more resources, more energies have to be shifted toward implementation as opposed to developing more alternatives, and I believe CAAT is moving in that direction as well.

**FBR: From what I have read in other interviews, you feel you differ from some other animal rights activists more in tactics than philosophy, and that sometimes you are labeled a "moderate" but you prefer to think of yourself as a pragmatist. How do you view yourself?**

Spira: I think I've been described as a rational pragmatist more so than a moderate. To me, pragmatism means that it's good to be moderate if that gets results. If there is no response, then you have to launch a public awareness campaign, you have to escalate. You start out with attempting dialogue in a rational way and if there's no response, I feel you've got to be willing to go public and keep escalating. I like to be least intrusive in my dealings with anybody as a matter of style and also strategy. In a labor situation, you don't start out with a strike, you start out with attempting to negotiate, attempting to talk. You use a strike basically as a last resort. You're not going out there in order to look for a fight, you're looking to get results. It's important that you see issues as problems with solutions.

**FBR: Are you opposed to all forms of animal research, including medical research, or do you believe some of it is necessary?**

Spira: If one talks about the ethical issue, I think that unless one believes in tyranny nobody has a right to harm another, period, whether it's one human to another human or a human to an animal. But we're living in the real world, and I think in the real world what one is looking for is not the unattainable ultimate but what's practical or doable. I think what's practical and doable is the concept of the Three R's [Reduction, Refinement and Replacement]. I don't believe that there's anyone who can rationally or reasonably make a dent in the concept of the Three R's. That's something that is unassailable, I believe. The reality is that if this were implemented across the board there would be an enormous reduction in the use of animals, and then for those remaining, efforts could be made to reduce their pain and distress and work toward quality of life--like with

the nonhuman primates. Instead of stacking them up like nuts and bolts we would take their interest into account. At that point it would make sense to me to shift substantial resources and energies over to the farm animal arena, where there are billions of animals suffering.

**FBR: It's interesting to think about animal research and veterinary medicine; if you do research on a small number you may end up helping a greater number in the future. What is your reaction to this argument?**

Spira: I don't think one can articulate a satisfaction with harming another being whether its human or nonhuman, but realistically speaking what I think one wants to concentrate on is: Let's do away with the use of animals in those areas where it can be done today and then let's do more tomorrow. For now, let's reduce pain and suffering. When you reach that point, you can see even further. It's an incremental thing. I think the unethical thing to do is to not do what's possible to do today.

**FBR: What are your views of the motivations of medical researchers? You've made an effort to work with people in the scientific community and even praise their effort at times. Many animal rights people say that they are motivated by greed. Do you think they have good intentions?**

Spira: Again, I don't think the issue is one of saints and sinners, I think the issue is structural change--that you no longer look upon nonhuman animals as tools or edibles. Neither in the animal movement nor the biomedical research community am I into the question of intent. I'm interested in what the end result is. I don't think there's any way to gauge intent. I think that the scientific community by and large is similar to the general population, where over 90 percent feel that it's an important issue that we do everything we can to not harm animals.

**FBR: You were involved in the civil rights movement, and you have talked about "the expanding circle of concern, which has grown to include humans regardless of sex or race, and which you think should now expand to include animals as well. You and others have said that speciesism is as bad as racism or sexism. Have members of minority groups ever expressed that they feel offended or debased by comparisons—such as the deaths of chickens with the Holocaust? Have you come across that sort of resentment?**

Spira: I don't see much point in comparing one living being to another living being. We're all different in our own way, but I think the one thing that ties all these movements together is the fight against domination, against exploitation, against tyranny. Tyranny in the sense that might makes right. The quote about the Holocaust [by Ingrid Newkirk of PETA] is one that has had a very long shelf life, and it is certainly not something I would ever say. I think the animal movement has a great deal of variety, and one could say this variety spotlights the robustness of the movement. It has a broad spectrum and can accommodate a great number of people.

The basic philosophy of the animal movement is non-violence. Still, in any movement for social change there are always extremes and exceptions. But, I think it's fair to say the animal protection movement has had less violence or threats of violence than any other movement for social change. And if the media gave fairer coverage to the issues themselves, on their own merits, there would probably be even fewer threats of violence. Some radical activists, certainly not without reason, may well feel that the only way you get media attention and thereby place the issue on the national agenda is by outrageous stunts or trashing labs.

In our campaigns, we generally welcome support from every direction in the movement regardless of differences that we may have on strategy. Or we can just agree to disagree and operate on the principle of live and let live.

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