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Lethal Dosing of Lab Animals Expected to Decline

Ernest Roberson

A national animal rights coalition leader yesterday predicted that the use of the "lethal dose 50 percent" test (LD 50), by which laboratory animals are poisoned with increasingly lethal doses of toxic substances, will be substantially reduced in the coming year.

Henry Spira, head of the New York-based Coalition to Abolish the LD 50, an umbrella group of more than 400 animal welfare organizations, said the nation's research institutions are yielding to economic and public pressures to curtail the use of the LD 50 method, which he says accounts for about 50 percent of all laboratory animal deaths. Animal rights groups estimate that the lives of between 60 and 100 million animals are sacrificed each year to scientific research.

Spira also acknowledged that a major incentive to curtail LD 50 use is "the realization by scientists that in many instances non-animal tests are more reliable predictors."

The coalition leader made the remarks yesterday during Action for Life, a four-day national conference on animal rights sponsored by the Farm Animal Reform Movement (FARM) at Montclair State College.

Spira said toxicologists, pharmacologists and others involved directly in testing for toxicity of substances intended for human consumption are not to blame for the widespread use of deadly animal tests. "The responsibility today primarily rests with the regulatory agencies like the FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) that insist upon the LD 50 and other have animal tests in biomedical and pharmaceutical research.

"The cosmetic, chemical- and environmental control industries also test products using lethal animal experiments, but for the most part the pharmaceutical and biomedical fields utilize far more animals," he said.

LD 50 was first used 55 years ago to measure the toxic effects of specific substances. Since humans could not be exposed to untried drugs for ethical reasons, the substances were tried on lab animals and data gained from toxicity experiments was extrapolated for effects in humans.

Many scientists and some in the animal rights movement now agree that the test was useful in its time, but they say LD 50 has outlived its usefulness. "LD 50 has become a standard ritual test being done because it exists," said Spira.

"In fact the LD 50 animal poisonings may not even protect the public health," he said. "Recently toxicologists have said that the test's value in animals rarely bears a meaningful relationship with the lethal dose in man."

Spira said his group's effort to reduce the use of LD 50 is part of a larger campaign aimed at substantially eliminating the use of animals in any scientific experiments. The group began its task by protesting the use of cats in experiments at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and then attacked the Draize test, which has been used widely by cosmetics industry researchers to test the irritation effects of cosmetics by squirting the substances in rabbits eyes.
At universities, the coalition advocates training students to use alternative research tools that do not depend upon live animal tests. "If animal experiments are justified at the university, they should only be carried out at the graduate student level. There is so much emphasis today on studying systems on the cellular level that many of the standard undergraduate animal experiments are obsolete anyway," Spira said.

He believes that the present flurry of research activity to enhance the effectiveness of existing non-animal alternatives and the development of new procedures will bring about drastic reductions in animal use within the next year. "The momentum has swung in favor of change that will affect research across the board," he said.

He said the coalition's future focus will be on demanding that the remaining animal research be based upon "impact statements" similar to those required for environment-related projects.

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