

Statement

2nd February 2024

Alliance calls for the central role of basic research to be recognised in approval procedures for experiments on animals

The Alliance of Science Organisations is concerned that the role and importance of basic research is being misunderstood in individual approval procedures for experiments involving animals. This is evident in the Bremen approval board's justification for their rejection of an approval application for an experiment on animals. The experiment would have occurred as part of a research project on cognition.

The application for the continuation of experiments with non-human primates in the field of cognitive research was rejected by the relevant Bremen board in November 2023. The board argued that the stress on the laboratory animals could not be justified by the intended gain in knowledge and that clinical application of the results was not foreseeable in the near future. The experimental project was therefore not ethically justifiable.

In the view of the science organisations, the board's reasoning is problematic in several respects. It could have far-reaching consequences beyond this individual case and call into question the justifiability of all experiments on animals in basic research. Basic research provides knowledge without which technical innovations, medical progress and the understanding of biological principles are impossible, even if this knowledge is characterised by the fact that it cannot promise any immediate or obvious application. Basic research is therefore of central importance for science and society. Accordingly, it is protected by constitutional law within the framework of the freedom of science and research.

The careful balancing of interests between the suffering of animals on the one hand and the gain in scientific knowledge on the other must be carried out continuously in the context of animal testing authorisation procedures. Animal experiments, which may also include studies on non-human primates, continue to be an essential part of the diverse range of methods used in life science research and are indispensable for obtaining basic scientific knowledge. The central ethical guiding principle is the 3R principle (replace, reduce, refine): animal experiments are only used in a complementary manner if no suitable animal-free methods exist. They are carried out in compliance with the highest animal welfare standards in order to minimise the number of animals used and the stress to which they are subjected. For the process of a balanced consideration of interests, the Alliance calls for the value of basic research to be appropriately recognised and for objective science-based criteria to be used to assess the stress on animals.

The science organisations appeal to all stakeholders involved in the approval process for animal experiments to proceed with due care and balance in the complex task of considering both interests: scientific freedom and animal welfare.

The Alliance of Science Organisations is an association of the most significant science organisations in Germany. It regularly comments on important issues of science policy. The Max Planck Society is a member of the Alliance and has taken on the role of spokesperson for 2024. Other members are the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Research Foundation, the Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centers, the German Rectors' Conference, the Leibniz Association, the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the German Science and Humanities Council.

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