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Animal talk

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Germany must do more to encourage dialogue on animal experimentation.

Subject terms: [Communication](#) [Health and medicine](#) [Community and Society](#)

Sandwiched between the towering edifices of the Bundestag and the Chancellor's office, and just a short walk from other government buildings, the old family villa that is home to the Swiss embassy makes for a curious sight in the political heart of modern-day Berlin. Last week, the embassy hosted an international meeting of scientists from around the world who defend the use of animals in research. But despite being invited, nobody from the government offices bothered even to drop in. German animal-welfare groups also declined to attend. That was unfortunate given that the gathering was intended to discuss the principles of the Basel Declaration, which promotes outreach by animal researchers to politicians and the public. And something else failed to materialize — Germany's plans to create a professional office to promote and implement the Basel Declaration principles, which some attendees had hoped would be announced at the meeting by the country's research organizations.

This lack of action reflects poorly on Germany's proclaimed interest in creating an environment within which its generously funded biomedical research can flourish. And it is disconcerting, because, like all countries in the European Union (EU), Germany must translate into national law a complex and controversial directive that regulates the use of animals in research.

The Basel Declaration was drafted at a meeting of mostly Swiss and German scientists last November. It has now been signed by nearly 900 people, some 500 of whom came from other countries. The scientists want the declaration to have the same authority over the

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ethics of animal experimentation as the 1964

Declaration of Helsinki has over the ethics of human experimentation. The formal infrastructure being developed around the declaration could help to realize this ambition.

The declaration was prompted by concerns over the EU animal-research directive, early drafts of which were so unfriendly to researchers that European scientists were shocked at how unprepared they were to lobby in the same arena as animal welfare and rights groups. Political battles raged for years before the directive was finally approved in 2010. Only one country abstained from what was otherwise a unanimous vote: Germany.

Why? Germany handed prime responsibility for the directive to the agricultural ministry. Others in the government, notably the research ministry, disagreed with this approach and the two ministries could not agree on much right up to the vote. The agricultural ministry is now handling implementation without consultation with scientists.

Had representatives of the German government showed up at last week's meeting, as their Swiss counterparts did, they would have heard from researchers how the loose wording of much of the directive could create difficulties for them while it is being implemented, and how they must therefore be consulted.

For example, the directive requires that a 'severity degree' classification be introduced for all approved animal procedures. The signatories to the Basel Declaration approve of this, but some government offices in Europe have discussed whether an experiment should automatically be given a higher severity grade if it uses animals that have been genetically engineered, and whether the classifications should be made public.

German animal-welfare groups could also be part of these debates — as Swiss ones are — but they rarely communicate with the research community.

This relationship presents a challenge for German signatories to the Basel agreement and is a prime example of why Germany needs an office to coordinate the outreach the declaration calls for. The country's research funding organizations — particularly stalwarts such as the Max Planck Society, the German Research Foundation and the Helmholtz Society — need to move swiftly to create such an office.

Switzerland has dodged bullets aimed at its sturdy scientific base by animal-rights campaigners and opponents of genetic engineering in recent years, partly by maintaining excellent communication and transparency. Germany will find it even harder to bring these groups together — but even the longest journey must start with a short walk.

Comments

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Mixum Jack said: " This relationship presents a challenge for German signatories to the Basel agreement and is a prime example of why Germany needs an office to coordinate the outreach the declaration calls for. The country's research funding organizations ? particularly stalwarts such as the Max Planck Society, the German Research Foundation and the Helmholtz Society ? need to move swiftly to create such an office." This part is great, thank you for this article. Cheap solar panels

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