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Animal tests

Will drugs industry go to the dogs?



SWITZERLAND'S powerful chemical companies are alarmed about an emotional public campaign here against experiments on animals. It is a controversial issue which will eventually be decided at the ballot box – and which could lead to far-reaching changes in Swiss law.

Swiss scientific and commercial laboratories, which include leaders of the world pharmaceutical industry, use around three million animals in research every year.

But animal lovers, arguing that such research is largely unnecessary, are pressing for a change in the constitution to ban allegedly cruel experiments, including vivisection.

The proposal backed by a petition with 151,000 signatures, will be voted on in a public referendum. Senior executives of the big three basle pharmaceutical firms are painting dire pictures of what would happen if the plan is adopted.

Yves Dunant, chairman of Sandoz, Switzerland's third largest chemical manufacturer, told shareholders: "If this petition ... is successful, medical and biological research at our universities would be heavily restricted. In research by the pharmaceutical industry, we would have to fear total paralysis".

Said Albert Bodmer, chief executive of Ciba-Geigy, Switzerland's largest drug company: "Research and development are the vital nerve of our company".

And he told his company's annual meet-

ing that a referendum banning animal experiments would "gravely impair the entire country's research effort".

Under current Swiss law, adopted by referendum in 1981 after another campaign against cruelty to animals, scientists must obtain an official permit for experiments on mammals likely to cause pain, fear or severe discomfort.

Animal lovers, however, say this has done little to limit cruel experiments in practice, even those on mammals. They say animals for experimental use are often kept in poor conditions or subjected to unnecessary suffering.

They also want a research ban to cover lower creatures such as insects and invertebrates.

But Sandoz chief Dunant listed medical advances which he said would have been impossible without such research, including discovery of vaccines, antibiotics and surgical methods.

He disputed claims that scientific knowledge is sufficiently advanced to render further animal tests obsolete.

Medicine, he said, is able to act only on symptoms, not causes, in many cases. Failure to maintain all research resources, he suggested, would keep the science in the dark ages.

A ban on animal experiments would also have severe repercussions for jobs in Switzerland, he said. Basle's drugs industry, more than 95 per cent export-dependent,

would be forced to move its research abroad if its hands were tied at home.

He claims some manufacturing repercussions would inevitably follow – in other words, the abolition of animal experiments would spark a chain reaction which would have the final effect of almost completely moving the pharmaceutical industry from Switzerland.

Such warnings are regarded as propaganda by many critics of the country's chemical multinationals. And they're considered too strong even by some other business executives in Basle.

But company officials say privately that Ciba-Geigy, Sandoz and the third Swiss pharmaceuticals giant, Hoffmann La Roche, fear falling behind in the highly competitive but hugely profitable international drugs market.

The companies are also worried that loss of animal experiments would hit not only the quantity but the quality of research.

Dunant said the industry has already managed to reduce animal experiments by using alternatives, such as tests on organs removed after death, on cell and tissue cultures and on micro-organisms.

"But to renounce animal experiments completely will probably not be possible. The complexity of the animal organism is a quality which cannot be replaced by a larger quantity of less complex methods", he added.

Meanwhile, in a move apparently desig-

ned in part to defuse the campaign, Swiss scientists have now published what they call ethical guidelines for animal experiments.

According to the principles, which are not legally binding, a researcher should limit experiments using animals to those that can be proved to be essential and endeavour to develop alternative methods.

The government here has so far been noncommittal on the issue, pointing only to the difficulty of defining exactly vivisection and cruel experiments.

A senior researcher at Zurich University denied recently that test animals in Switzerland were receiving particularly poor treatment. He said in a newspaper article: "All in all, if I had the choice, I would prefer to be a guinea pig in our institute than a fattened pig in a modern meat factory".

★★★

BACK in Britain recently on my annual visit to family and friends, I was amused to read the Sunday newspaper tale of two Swiss tourists.

It seems that a middle-aged couple from Basle were strolling along the River Thames near Oxford when they stopped to admire a luxury, white-hulled river cruiser at the quayside. It was a warm and pleasant evening, and the couple decided to follow the other passengers stepping on board for a cruise.

Once on board they were delighted with their snap decision to spend a few hours on the river.

They helped themselves to sandwiches, chicken legs, and sausage rolls from the buffet and chilled wine from the bar.

Any nobody asked for a penny.

Here indeed, thought the Swiss couple, was British hospitality at its most generous.

But as the cruiser glided gently downstream, another passenger decided to chat with the shy-looking bespectacled man and his wife. And as their conversation progressed, the terrible truth dawned on the visiting tourists.

They had gate-crashed a private party.

Said British racing driver John Llewellyn, who had organised the three-hour cruise with drink, food and disco for a large party of friends and business associates: "I was told we had two stowaways on board but I just

couldn't believe it.

"They were very pleasant people and terribly upset about their mistake. I could hardly put them ashore. So we entertained them as best we could.

"They thought they were on a commercial trip round the sights of Oxford. They told me they thought British hospitality was terrific when they were offered free drink and food and not asked to pay a penny.

"It would have been a shame to spoil it all by making a fuss. After all it was a genuine mistake".

The couple were put ashore when the cruise ended back in Oxford, and walked off into the night still marvelling at how easy it was to make friends.

And how inexpensive.

★★★

TALKING of tourists, most guests staying at Switzerland's excellent hotels leave with a highly favourable impression of this country's standards of service and hospitality.

But some guests, it seems, leave their hotels with a lot more – anything they can lay their hands on, in fact. Most hotels expect the

occasional ashtray or spoon to disappear into the luggage of souvenir-hunting holiday-makers. But the list of stolen property now covers anything from Bibles and bed linen to curtains and cupboards.

According to one hotelier: "Anything that's not actually nailed to the floor risks being stolen these days".

Thefts are made easier when guests can take a lift direct from their floor to the underground garage, instead of having to pass by the reception.

One Lucerne hotel claims to lose up to 400 fondue forks every year, and a hotel in Zurich the same numbers of coffee spoons.

The Hilton Hotel in the same city reported the theft of a painting which had been cut out of its frame, and the Hilton in Basle said one of its guests walked off with the colour TV from his room. At another hotel, American tourists climbed out onto the roof and stole the Swiss flag.

But when a Swiss newspaper asked Zurich's exclusive Dolder Grand Hotel if any of its property had ever been stolen, the management replied: "That kind of thing never happens at this class of hotel".



"Yes thank you, staying at your hotel was a most rewarding experience . . ."

(courtesy Blick)