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Scientists' Blinders Cost Human, Animal Lives

From The Daily Union, Thursday, Aug 2

By Jessica Sandler and Kate Willett

McClatchy Newspapers

Is there any adult in America who is unaware that exposure to asbestos is linked to certain cancers and respiratory diseases? The cause and effect has been conclusively documented, yet our government is now proposing to spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars and use tens of thousands of animals to re-explore this issue.

And that's just the tip of this illogical iceberg. The Department of Health and Human Services' National Toxicology Program also wants to do more experiments on animals with such known dangerous substances as methanol, ethylene glycol (antifreeze) and diacetyl, an ingredient of microwave popcorn butter flavoring that causes "popcorn workers' lung disease" -- a sometimes fatal deterioration of the lungs of factory workers who handle it.

When we have reams of studies involving people and we know that something is just bad news, why would anyone suggest poisoning more animals with it?

According to "Toxicity Testing in the 21st Century: A Vision and a Strategy" by the Academy's National Research Council, toxicity experiments using animals are expensive, time-consuming and don't reliably predict what happens to people exposed to the chemicals. Asbestos and butter flavoring are perfect examples, as neither one of these substances affects animals in the same way that they do humans.

There has been a revolution in our understanding of biology since the 1950s and '60s, when many of the animal tests that are now in use



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were devised. The NRC report describes the potential effect of this revolution: "Toxicity testing is approaching a scientific pivot point. ... It is poised to take advantage of the revolutions in biology and biotechnology" and largely replace animal tests with cutting-edge non-animal methods.

Yet, according to the report, many scientists are so comfortable with the status quo that they won't welcome any change: "(C)urrent toxicity-testing practices are long established and deeply ingrained in some sectors," the report warns. "Thus, some resistance to the vision proposed by this committee is expected."

Rather than upset its system, the government's current animal-testing programs virtually ignore the new science and an entire era of scientific progress.

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) saw this firsthand recently when we testified to NTP representatives at the meeting of its Board of Scientific Counselors at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. They acknowledged the truth of what we said -- that animal tests are unpredictable -- and then confirmed the report's concern that some scientists will resist change against all reason.

When we pointed out that animals exposed to butter flavoring don't show the same effects as humans, one panelist acknowledged that, yes, "it's not clear how one would extrapolate findings from the animal studies to humans" then went on to state, in a shocking non sequitur, "but that doesn't lessen my enthusiasm for this study."

While our initial interest in toxicology was prompted by our desire to protect animals from cruel, useless experiments, the fact that these animal tests do not adequately protect public health or the environment should be of the utmost concern to everyone.

Rather than maintaining this ineffective status quo, the government should apply its resources to the use of human-relevant non-animal methods to regulate toxic chemicals.

The scientists whose mandate is protecting the public health need to get a copy of the NRC report and study it cover to cover. We have the information we need to protect popcorn and asbestos workers -- and many others -- right now. Giving a green light to this bottomless pit of animal tests delays needed protections, wastes taxpayer funds, is cruel to animals and represents just plain shoddy science.

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