

Italy's scientists stand up for animal testing

Debate about the use of animals in research is escalating in Italy, where politicians are preparing legislation that could significantly limit scientific testing.

In December, scientists in support of using animals in research presented Italy's Chamber of Deputies, one of the country's two houses of parliament, with a petition appealing to lawmakers not to tighten the rules on animal testing. The petition, which gained about 13,300 signatures, said the government's plan to introduce stricter rules constituted "a serious attack on the freedom of scientific research" and would hamper health and biomedical science studies in Italy.

But those in support of the plans have fought back. Earlier this month, animal-rights campaigners posted flyers in Milan identifying four researchers by name for their work involving experiments on animals.

At the centre of the turmoil is the EU directive on animals in research that was implemented in January 2013. In July, Italian politicians set out plans to introduce limitations beyond those required by the EU. These included prohibiting the breeding of dogs, cats and nonhuman primates for scientific purposes and, from 2017, banning the use of animals for research into drug addiction and xenotransplantation.

The proposals reflect a rise in public opposition to animal testing in Italy. The European Citizens' Initiative petition Stop Vivisection, calling on the European Commission to replace animal experiments with alter-

by Marta Paterlini

news@ResearchResearch.com

native methods, recently reached its goal of one million signatures, with more than 700,000 supporters from Italy. The petition's promoters said that more than 87 per cent of Italians were against animal experimentation, although pro-testing groups dispute this figure.

The final decision in Italy is expected in March, and some question whether the amendments as they stand would be legal under EU law. Regardless of the outcome, Roberto Caminiti, a physiologist at the Sapienza University of Rome and chairman of the Committee on Animals in Research for the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies, says scientists should have worked harder to raise public awareness of the importance of animal testing.

However, Giuseppe Remuzzi, a scientist at the Mario Negri institute for pharmacological research and president of the International Society of Nephrology, says that scientists did speak out. "The fact is that the media give space to animal-rights activists and not to us, and ignorance gives space to emotions," he says.

Meanwhile, Richard Moriggl, director of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Cancer Research in Vienna, says this issue is not confined to Italy. "Talking about animal testing has become a difficult task," he claims. "Ignorance in many politicians joins a strong, unscientific prejudice, which will affect European science at large."