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Strict Limits on Animal Research Stun Italian Scientists

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In a major victory for animal rights activists, the Italian Parliament on Wednesday approved a bill that puts drastic limitations on animal testing. Scientists have warned that the provisions, voted by the Senate earlier this month, will severely hurt biomedical research in their country—but they haven't given up hope yet that the measures will be canceled.

“This Italian bill is brutal and is going to kill basic research,” says Roberto Caminiti, a physiologist at the University of Rome La Sapienza and chair of the Committee on Animals in Research for the Federation

of European Neuroscience Societies.

The bill is Italy's implementation of a European directive adopted in September 2010; the country was one of several E.U. members that have been dragging their feet on the directive's implementation [1].

The Italian law goes far beyond the restrictions imposed by the directive, already seen by many researchers as quite restrictive. Among other things, the law bans breeding dogs, cats, and nonhuman primates for research purposes, or using them for any other purpose than health research; studies without pain killers or anesthesia, if the animal may experience pain (unless these are themselves the subject of the study); and using animals in studies of addiction, xenotransplantation, and for training purposes (except in higher education for veterinarians and physicians).

The bill also says that more scientific research is needed into the use of alternatives for animal testing and says animals that have been in one study can be reused in further tests only if it is really necessary.

“The Italian legislation represents a big revolution and an innovative act in favor of lab animals,” says Michela Kuan, a biologist and a member of the animal rights group Lega Anti Vivisezione [2] (LAV) in Rome. The law will help stimulate alternatives to animal testing and eventually help phase out animal studies altogether, she says. Caminiti says abolishing animal studies altogether is for now an illusion, given that there is no treatment for many diseases.

Scientists, who recently rallied around the country to defend their research [3], are stunned by their defeat but not prepared to throw in the towel just yet. Countries are allowed to have more restrictive rules than those in the E.U. directive only if they were already in place before September 2010; that was not the case in Italy, and scientists may lobby the European Commission to start a so-called infringement procedure, says Dario Padovan, a biologist and

coordinator of the Scientific Committee of Pro-Test Italia, a new organization that seeks to defend and explain animal research. Scientists will also try to sway Italian politicians, Padovan says.

In addition, scientists are hopeful that the Italian government, which has yet to sign off on the law, will refuse to do so. Ilaria Capua, a former [avian influenza researcher](#) [4] who is now a member of Parliament for the Scelta Civica, the party of former prime minister Mario Monti, says that the government is committed to avoiding severe restrictions on animal research. Capua was one of the first to sign an official request by Scelta Civica asking the government to stop the new law from taking effect.

**Correction, 6 August, 11:11 a.m.: Mario Monti is the former prime minister of Italy, not the current prime minister. This has been fixed.*

Links:

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/environment/chemicals/lab_animals/transposition_en.htm

[2] <http://www.lav.it/>

[3] <http://news.sciencemag.org/people-events/2013/06/around-italy-researchers-rally-defend-science?ref=ra>

[4] <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/314/5801/918.summary>