



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

ANIMAL TESTING AND HEALTH OF LIVING BEINGS

(8th July 1997)

abstract

The NBC deals with the issue of the ethical justification for the sacrifice that we impose on the animals used for scientific experimentation, since the primacy of man – axiological assumption – over every other living being, does not constitute unlimited power, but has necessary ethical limits. The various approaches to research on animals and the transposition to man of the results of these experiments are described in the opinion, by means of a historical excursus.

The NBC acts within the paradigm in which experimentation on animals is considered “not completely replaceable”, distinguishing itself from those positions which tend to rule out any exploitation of animal life (rightism). It is a perspective close to animalism which is not fundamentalist, especially as regards so-called welfarism, that is, the constant and continuous search and implementation of animal well-being in breeding, the continuity of domestic life, housing, transportation and sacrifice. The NBC believes that the relationship between man and animal should be safeguarded and promoted in order to surmount the concept of the animal as an instrument, recognising the animal as an “other” with specific value and its own dignity which may even extend to an active subjectivity.

In the sphere of predictability of results, particularly with regard to pharmacotoxic investigations, the Committee notes that the parameters for animal testing of new molecules for the life and health of the living are superimposable to those valid for man. Therefore, these experiments are considered legitimate on condition that the following precautions and recommendations are taken into account: 1) assessment of the rationale and objectives of the experimentation; 2) determination of benefits that also includes the assessment of a threshold or limit of tolerability of animal suffering, that is, the degree of proportionality between expected benefits (especially if uncertain) and the damage or discomfort which may be provoked.

Also examined is the possibility of introducing “alternative methods” to animal testing (despite there being some “confusion” regarding this definition). On this point opinions are divided between those who believe it illusory to envisage to the public the possibility of replacement of in vivo animal testing with alternative methods and those who consider the cessation of the use of animals for scientific purposes as not far away.

The law itself is called upon to accomplish a special role in mediating between these conflicting demands: therefore examination of European and Italian regulations on animal experimentation is fully treated.