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ECCO urges MEPs to think of patients' interests when they vote on a review of a Directive on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes

ECCO – the European CanCer Organisation – has urged members of the European Parliament not to forget the interests of patients when they take a crucial vote on amendments to the EU Directive on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes (Review of Directive 86/609/EEC) tomorrow (Tuesday 31 March).

President of ECCO, Professor Alexander M.M. Eggermont, has written to the members of the European Parliament Agriculture Committee, who will be voting on the issue tomorrow, highlighting ECCO's concerns about several of the amendments that are being proposed.

“ECCO's primary mission is to improve human health, and to win the fight against cancer. We hope that MEPs will not forget this in their understandable desire to protect laboratory animals,” writes Prof Eggermont. “We would like to point out that some of the contents of the revised Directive, as well as some amendments proposed by Committee members, could affect the lives of millions of European cancer patients in the years to come.

“We are particularly concerned about two areas:

- the proposed restrictions of the use of non-human primates in medical research
- amendments which would severely limit, if not stop entirely, essential medical research, making the administrative procedures hugely cumbersome

“Because non-human primates are our nearest animal ‘relation’, their use in medical research is a difficult issue which raises considerable moral concerns. However, there are areas where their use is essential. The Directive proposal to limit the use of primates to research that *‘is undertaken with a view to the avoidance, prevention, diagnosis or treatment of life-threatening or debilitating clinical conditions in human beings’* may prevent these animals being used in some areas of fundamental research where the primary aim is to gain new knowledge. It is not always possible to demonstrate the relevance of such knowledge to particular diseases or conditions at the time the work is proposed.

“Perhaps most worrying of all are several amendments which, if passed, would raise the regulatory hurdles so high that it seems likely that essential research could be held up for years. Introducing such lengthy administrative procedures will not improve animal welfare, but will greatly affect European medical research. We are particularly concerned about amendment 311, proposed by Mr [Neil] Parish, which calls for all applications for research projects involving animals to be subject to public consultation, in order that regulatory authorities may have ‘*access to the widest range of views on which to base decisions*’. While this may seem as though it will bring about a welcome increase in transparency, medical researchers know from experience that the vast majority of views transmitted will come through organised write-in campaigns from animal rights groups, and collecting and collating them all will add months to the already lengthy process of authorisation.

“On behalf of European patients, doctors, and researchers, we ask you most sincerely to allow us to continue to work to reduce the burden of cancer and not to put unnecessary barriers in our way,” concludes Prof Eggermont.

(ends)

Notes:

ECCO – the European CanCer Organisation – exists to uphold the right of all European cancer patients to the best possible treatment and care and to promote interaction between all organisations involved in cancer research, education, treatment and care at the European level. For more information, visit: www.ecco-eu.org

Timetable for the revised Directive:

31 March: the Agriculture Committee (lead committee) takes the final vote on amendments and adoption of the report by rapporteur Neil Parish.

21-24 April or 4-7 May: potential dates for debate on Parish’s report in plenary session.

Thereafter, the first reading by the Council of Ministers will consider both the original Commission proposal and the Parliament’s amendments. If the Council of Ministers accepts all the Parliament’s amendments, the proposal becomes law. Otherwise the proposal will proceed to a second reading.

Other European organisations involved in the cancer research have also written to the members of the Agriculture Committee expressing their concern about the impact of some of the amendments on the future of cancer research. These include the European Coalition for Biomedical Research, of which the European Association for Cancer Research (EACR) is a member. The EACR is also a member of ECCO.

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