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Opinion: Time to rethink how we use animals to test pharmaceuticals



Sen. John Neely Kennedy (R-La.) plays with dogs belonging to Senate staff members before an Oct. 7 news conference in Washington. (Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)



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October 8, 2021 at 7:05 p.m. EDT

Every now and then, a sliver of sanity seeps through the barricade of national lunacy.

This past week, a handful of bipartisan lawmakers introduced two bills aimed at ending one of our nation's most-barbaric practices — mandatory animal testing of new pharmaceuticals destined for human trials.

It's been a while since I've performed a midair, double-heeled click, but I managed a reasonable facsimile upon hearing this news. The Senate's "[FDA Modernization Act](#)" and the House's [H.R. 2565](#) set the stage for a

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groundbreaking move to end animal suffering while also advancing timelier and more efficient drug development.

In part, the measures result from lessons learned during development of the [coronavirus](#) vaccine: We don't need to wait so long to develop human therapies if we bypass some of the archaic demands of outdated laws, in particular, a 1930's-era law that required animal testing before human trials. When the pandemic demanded swift action on a vaccine, the Food and Drug Administration worked with government officials and pharmaceutical companies to create lifesaving drugs in record time. This happened because Moderna and Pfizer were [allowed to run animal testing](#) and early trials on humans at the same time, rather than completing separate animal trials first.

The best reason to stop using animals in drug tests is the fact that animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do. (If they did, we might as well all go to veterinarians for our shots.) Although the use of animals in science and medicine has benefited human beings, there's significant evidence that "human subjects have been harmed in the clinical testing of drugs that were deemed safe by animal studies," as [Gail A. Van Norman wrote](#) in the journal *JACC: Basic to Translational Science*.

Alarming, adverse drug reactions are the [fourth leading cause of death](#) in the United States after heart disease. It does not sound to me like using animals — normally mice and monkeys — is worth the price in cruelty we pay for our health.

Besides, other ways of conducting research are available and already in use. The first is a technique that performs a procedure in a controlled environment outside of a living organism, which sounds a lot better than the alternative. Such tests are already in use and typically involve tests or experiments performed on computers or via computer simulation. This method also is being used in studies that predict how drugs interact with the body and with pathogens.

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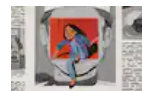
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Nevertheless, drug companies and the scientific community likely will fight this initiative, just as they have in past years, if only because they don't want to change how they do business. Several important animal rights victories, including President Trump's [ban on using dogs in experiments](#), has some firms and many scientists worried about the future of such research.

Cultural trends also seem to suggest that public opinion is shifting on animal research. [A 2018 Pew Research Center study](#) found that a slight majority of Americans (52 percent) oppose animal testing. But it is not without exceptions: When asked about genetic engineering of animals, the numbers shift toward the survival of our species over others. Only 21 percent think that engineering aquarium fish to glow is an appropriate use of technology, for example, while 57 percent approve of using animals to grow organs and tissue for humans in need of a transplant.

Though there didn't seem to be any significant partisan alignments, there was evidence that support for animal testing rises with education. Americans with postgraduate degrees support animal experimentation to a greater degree because, theoretically, they've likely had greater exposure to science. The less educated more often oppose animal experimentation.

Still, some in the scientific community are getting worried about the future of animal research. Ken Gordon, executive director of a Seattle biomedical research firm, has tracked U.S. attitudes toward animal research using 17 years of Gallup polls. Extrapolating, he [predicts](#) that the portion of the public that finds animal testing "morally wrong" will exceed the portion that finds it "morally acceptable" within the next two to three years.

When that happens, he said, "funding will dry up, and our work will get a lot more difficult."

That's probably an overstatement. I'd like to think that science and humane research can coexist. Much of what we do in research today is because of how we've always done it — ever since the 4th century B.C. when Aristotle was

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performing animal experiments to learn about anatomy. Several millennia later is time enough to liberate our animal hostages along with our better angels — and put technology to its highest and best uses. Besides, given what we know, it just makes sense.

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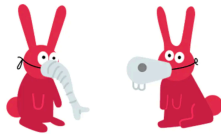
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