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Opinion Medical development without animal testing is the goal, but we're not there yet

November 2, 2021 at 9:58 a.m. EDT



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Kathleen Parker's Oct. 8 op-ed, "[Time to rethink how we use animals to test pharmaceuticals.](#)" could have led readers to believe that entrenched interests use animals in scientific discovery simply because "they don't want to change how they do business." Her piece ignores the decades of basic research required for the development of drugs before they

are tested on humans or animals. As a physician and neuroscientist who explores the brain circuitry for social and emotional behavior, I find this omission misleading and offensive to all scientists.

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The publicly and privately funded scientific enterprise relies on animal models because there is no alternative. At this time, we have no way to delve into the deep biological underpinnings of how the brain drives reasoning, emotion and organizes behavior without studying animals, especially other primates. Studies of this nature must be undertaken to inform the development of treatments for Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, addiction, chronic pain and severe mental illness — diseases that millions of Americans and their families struggle with daily.

As an animal lover, I understand why Ms. Parker's proposal is attractive. Physicians, researchers and regulators, however, understand that her proposal to use new technologies as alternatives to animal research is not yet realistic. We will happily abandon animal research when tissue cultures, computer models and organs on chips are capable of manifesting pain, false beliefs or depression. I am longing for that day.

Katalin Gothard, Tucson

The writer is a professor of physiology and neuroscience at the Arizona Health Sciences.

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In her Oct. 8 op-ed, "[Time to rethink how we use animals to test pharmaceuticals](#)," Kathleen Parker asserted that animal research is no longer necessary to ensure the safety of new drugs, instead suggesting that non-animal in vitro methods are sufficient. Ms. Parker further suggested that scientists continue to use animals because they are reluctant to change.

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These assertions could not be more wrong. Today, researchers use animal models only when necessary to answer specific scientific questions that cannot be explored using non-animal methods. Alternative methods are used wherever possible and new technologies — such as “tissues on a chip” — are under development. However, before such methods can replace the use of animal models, they must be adequately validated to ensure that they provide sufficient or better information to answer the scientific question being asked.

The federal government continues to invest in research to develop and validate alternative methods, but as National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins told a congressional committee this year “to be honest, for the foreseeable future, if we’re going to make advances in things like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, rare diseases, we are still going to need to depend for a lot of that effort on animal research.”

Sonnet Jonker, *Portland, Ore.*

The writer is chair of the American Physiological Society’s Animal Care and Experimentation Committee.

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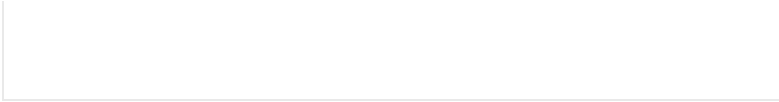
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