

The use of animals in product development

RSPCA Australia has received a number of enquiries regarding an investigation by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) into the treatment of animals by the pet food producer IAMS. This information sheet provides some background information on the use of animals in product development in general, and on the specific issues raised by the PETA investigation.

Why are animals used in product development?

Animals are used in the development of new medical, veterinary and other products to work out whether or not the product does what it is supposed to do, and whether there are any side-effects. This may involve recreating a medical condition in the animal, such as diabetes or liver failure, to test whether the treatment can alleviate the symptoms. In the case of nutrition research, it may involve feeding different substances to animals with nutritional problems to see if they improve the animal's condition. While many research techniques, such as cell-based studies, do not involve the use of live animals, there are still some areas where alternatives have not been identified and live animals continue to be used.

Animals are also used to test the safety of new products. These may be new drugs or other medical or veterinary treatments, or more general products such as washing powder, paint, or a new food additive. Safety testing is carried out because there are legal requirements that all substances that come into contact with humans or animals must be tested for their safety. This applies to any new substances or combinations of substances in medical and veterinary products, toiletries, and household products. In most cases this will involve some testing on animals, unless a non-animal alternative has been approved (which at the present time is unusual). If a company wants to market a new product it cannot be released unless these tests are carried out.

How is animal research controlled?

In Australia, all research and teaching that involves the use of animals must be carried out in accordance with the Code of Practice for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. Under the Code, which is enforced by State and Territory legislation, applications for research using animals must be assessed by an institutional Animal Ethics Committee (AEC). The AEC must include at least one animal welfare member and a lay member as well as a veterinarian and a scientist. The AEC decides whether or not an experiment can be conducted, and can place provisions on the numbers of animals used, the care and use of the animals involved and on how the project will be monitored. If a researcher does not comply with the AEC then approval for the project can be withdrawn, and the researcher can be charged under the relevant State legislation.

Most other developed countries have similar systems in place to regulate the use of animals in research, although they vary considerably in the way in which the regulations are enforced and the standards of housing and care that are applied. Standards of animal care in Australian laboratories are generally considered to be high compared to other countries.

RSPCA Australia policy on animal research

RSPCA policy on the use of animals in research states that:

RSPCA Australia is opposed to the use of live animals in experiments. RSPCA Australia accepts, however, that until alternative techniques are developed the use of live animals in some experiments will occur. Such experiments should only be permitted when their aims are to provide direct benefits to humans or animals and when conducted in such a manner that pain, suffering or distress is avoided.

RSPCA Australia actively encourages the development of alternative techniques for research and teaching purposes, and strongly supports the role of institutional Animal Ethics Committees in reviewing the protocols of all proposed experiments involving animals to ensure that the experiment is justified, the facilities within the institution are adequate for that experiment, the people involved have the necessary skills and experience to carry out the experiment, the number of animals used is minimised and the least invasive procedures possible are used.

Further details of RSPCA policy on this issue can be found at the RSPCA Australia website www.rspca.org.au

The use of animals by pet food manufacturers

Companies that produce pet foods, especially those that are aimed at treating particular conditions through improved nutrition (such as old age, arthritis or obesity) may carry out research using animals in order to develop new products. In some cases this may involve experiments that simulate disease conditions in the animals. In other cases, new diets may be tested out using animals with a pre-existing (naturally occurring) condition. Research is also carried out on healthy animals to examine the effects of different nutrients and on food preferences.

Most pet food manufacturers are owned by larger parent companies. These are often multinationals that include a range of industries, such as pharmaceuticals, processed foods and household products. Such companies would be involved in a range of animal-based research and testing.

IAMS

In 2002, an investigation was carried out by the US-based group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) into the treatment of animals in a research facility contracted by IAMS to carry out nutrition research. The PETA investigation alleged that there was an institutional lack of regard for the welfare of animals within the facility and described specific instances of alleged cruelty to animals in the reports prepared by their undercover employee. Details of the investigation can be viewed on the PETA website www.peta.org.

The PETA investigation led to an internal review of the care and use of animals by IAMS. As a result the company has ended all research at the facility in question and has also established an International Animal Care Advisory Board to oversee all of its animal research programs. This board is made up of representatives of a number of independent animal welfare organisations including the ASPCA and the Humane Society of the United States. Despite these moves, several welfare organisations have distanced themselves from IAMS following the investigation and no longer use this brand of pet food.

RSPCA Australia does not have any formal connection with IAMS. The IAMS or Eukanuba brands of pet food are not used by the RSPCA in Australia.

IAMS is owned by Procter & Gamble, which also produces foods, pharmaceuticals, toothpastes, toiletries, washing products and many other items. The bulk of P&G's research and development is carried out in the USA and Europe, as is the case with many other multinational companies.

Hill's Pet Nutrition

RSPCA Australia has an ongoing relationship with Hill's Pet Nutrition, the manufacturers of Hill's Science Diet. Hill's provide food free-of-charge to all the animals housed in RSPCA shelters for adoption, and the company also sponsors the annual RSPCA Million Paws Walk. Because of the concern over the PETA investigation into use of animals by the manufacturer of IAMS and Eukanuba pet foods, questions have been asked about whether Hill's are also involved in use of animals to develop and test their products.

There is no connection between Hill's and Procter & Gamble. Although Hill's began as a small independent company, it is now owned by another large multinational, Colgate-Palmolive. In terms of the treatment of animals by Hill's themselves, the company provides a statement (which is available on their website) on the use of animals in research (see inset box). The statement explains the type of research that Hill's carries out and makes it clear that Hill's does not carry out any research that could jeopardise the health of the animals involved. This applies to both studies conducted by Hill's themselves, or on behalf of Hill's at external facilities.

Hill's parent company, Colgate-Palmolive, produces a range of other products that will, by law, require some animal testing. However, no specific concerns have been raised with RSPCA Australia about the treatment of animals by any Colgate-Palmolive company.

Hill's Commitment to Animal Welfare

August 22, 2002

At Hill's, we've built a reputation as a company with the highest ethical standards. Our mission is to help enrich and lengthen the special relationships between people and their pets. We believe that good science and compassionate animal care are inseparable. We neither tolerate nor condone the inhumane treatment of dogs and cats for any reason. Therefore, all animal studies supported by Hill's must comply with our policies to ensure exceptional and humane animal care. Animal studies, whether conducted at the Hill's Nutrition Center or at external facilities such as veterinary schools or universities, are governed by the following rules:

- We don't conduct studies unless we have compelling evidence that we can improve the health and welfare of companion animals.
- We are driven to find ways to reduce dependence on animal research. Our veterinarians and nutritionists are skilled at developing non-animal models that simulate animal systems.
- We do not participate in studies that jeopardize the health of cats and dogs. No study supported by Hill's results in the death or injury of any cat or dog.
- When it is necessary to conduct animal studies to learn how a nutrient in one of our foods is absorbed, distributed, used, stored and released by a dog's or cat's body, we conduct studies that are the veterinary equivalent of human nutritional or medical studies.
- To assure pet owners that our therapeutic foods are safe and effective, we support studies using dogs and cats with naturally occurring diseases or conditions within the general pet population. We do not participate in studies in which surgical procedures or non-surgical methods are used to create or simulate disease
- conditions. We neither fund faculty positions at universities nor do we support research through industry groups or associations that are not committed to this core belief.
- Animal care standards at the Hill's Nutrition Center and any external facility in which we conduct studies must meet or exceed the standards of the federal Animal Welfare Act or Directive 86/609/EEC of the European Union. For all studies conducted at external facilities, we appoint and fund pet advocates who are responsible for ensuring that compassionate care is delivered. Exercise and a socially enriched environment are key components.
- We enthusiastically encourage adoption of dogs and cats previously enrolled in studies. We recommend adoptions occur under the guidelines of the Humane Society of the United States.
- We publish the results of our studies to advance the knowledge of nutritional health care and to help prevent the unwarranted repetition of studies that require the use of dogs and cats

No pet food company can match the nutritional breakthroughs of Hill's Pet Nutrition. As part of our mission to help enrich and lengthen the special relationships between people and their pets, we're committed to providing even more safe, effective, innovative nutritional solutions to help pets live longer, healthier lives. As we deliver on this promise, we'll also continue to provide the highest standards of care for the dogs and cats that depend on us.

How can I reduce or avoid animal testing?

Since most advances in medicine and veterinary health involve some animal research, it is virtually impossible to access medical or veterinary care and avoid using any products that have been developed using animals. But much of the safety testing that involves animals is for non-medical products. There are choices that companies can make which will reduce or eliminate the need for animal testing. Only new ingredients in products require testing. If companies stick to old formulations, or to combinations of chemicals that have previously been safety tested, then no further testing is required. Unfortunately consumers tend to encourage the development and marketing of new products, which in turn results in more animal testing.

Those companies which advertise that they do not carry out animal testing will generally have a policy that they only use ingredients that have already been tested (by other companies). Some of these companies will have a 'fixed cut-off date', say 1990, and they will only use ingredients that were tested before this date. Others will have a 'rolling date' where they will only use ingredients that have not been tested in the past 5 or 10 years. Other companies may state that they do not test their 'products' on animals, but in many cases they test the ingredients, or they pay an external company to do the testing for them.

There is no simple solution to avoiding animal testing. There are things that you can do to help reduce the amount of testing carried out, such as avoiding buying 'new improved' formulations and checking labels to see if a company makes claims about animal testing and asking what these claims mean.

RSPCA Australia encourages all companies involved in the use of animals to actively pursue and implement alternatives to the use of animals in research, and to work towards the elimination of the use of animals in routine safety testing.

RSPCA Australia
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For further information on animal welfare issues or the work of RSPCA Australia, go to www.rspca.org.au

The RSPCA is an independent, non-government community-based charity providing animal care and protection services. The RSPCA relies on donations from the public in order to carry out its work. If you would like to make a donation to the RSPCA please visit the RSPCA website at www.rspca.org.au and click on 'help us'. You can also ring the RSPCA Donation Line on 1800 803 305.