TORONTO HUMANE SOCIETY like no other.

Toronto Humane Society Position Statement: Animals Used for Medical Research and Science

Toronto Humane Society (THS) strives to be a leader in animal welfare and advocates that wherever viable alternatives exist, no live animals should be used for medical research or experimentation. Where live animals are employed, best efforts should be exercised to reduce the number of animals to a minimum needed to obtain sufficient data, and without compromising animal welfare.[1] Finally, in all circumstances, emphasis should be placed on reducing an animal's pain, suffering and distress, so that their physical and behavioural needs are met in accordance with the Five Domains.[2]

Toronto Humane Society advocates for both public and private organizations using live animals in research to actively pursue alternative approaches, with the goal to end testing on animals as soon as scientifically possible. Toronto Humane Society further calls on the Federal government to introduce legislation that honours the Five Freedoms and protects the welfare of live animals used for medical testing today. Strong enforcement mechanisms, including third-party verification should also be applied, with strict penalties for violations. Canadians' increasing appreciation for animal sentience has led to a demand for robust animal protection laws and Toronto Humane Society believes such measures would be largely supported by the public.

A Brief History of Medical Testing & Experimentation on Animals

The term "animal testing" encompasses a wide range of procedures performed on live animals, many of which include the infliction of pain to study physiology responses or forced exposure to chemicals and drugs, and periods of physical restraint for observation purposes. These procedures often cause suffering and result in death at the end of an experiment, either as a direct cause of the experiment or by euthanasia after the procedure is completed.

The use of live animals for medical research has a history spanning millennia. Greek figures, such as Aristotle, dissected animals to deduce anatomical structure and advance society's understanding of anatomy, physiology and pathology. These practices have since become the established manner of pursuing scientific understanding, evolving over the years and becoming industrialized. Animal testing today has expanded beyond medical research to the development and release of new commercial products. Some historic examples of animals helping advance medical science include the use of mice in the development of insulin therapy for diabetes. The discovery of the polio vaccine resulted from studies on monkeys, and rabbits were used to develop the first effective rabies vaccine. The cardiac pacemaker was invented in part by electrically stimulating canine hearts to understand how to control abnormal rhythms.

Toronto Humane Society acknowledges the contributions animals have made to medical discovery, and during a time where no plausible alternatives existed. While beneficial for society, millions of animals paid for these advancements with their lives. Accurate data on animals used in medical research each

year is impossible to ascertain as most countries do not publish statistics. The result today is a lack of transparency on true numbers and scope of procedures where animals are used for this purpose.

Canadian Legislative Landscape

The Canadian Federal government does not currently regulate or oversee the use of animals in research and testing, putting these animals at risk of mistreatment. Where institutions receive government funding that involves testing on animals, oversight is outsourced to the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) – a non-profit organization that establishes guidelines for the use of animals in scientific research and reports data on number of animals used in science. In 2024, the CCAC reported 3,706,907 animals used in research and testing, including 1,713,418 tests on fish, 1,202,233 tests on mice, 23,770 tests on pigs, 9,252 tests on dogs and 7,826 tests on non-human primates.[3] The CCAC also categories procedures on animals by level invasiveness ranging from experiments causing low discomfort/stress to those causing severe pain. Results from 2024 reported over one million procedures causing "moderate to severe distress or discomfort" to the animal and nearly 100,000 procedures causing "severe pain, near, at, or above the pain tolerance threshold of unanesthetized conscious animals."

There are many challenges with the CCAC oversight framework. Notably, the CCAC is not a government agency – it relies largely on voluntary reporting from its members and has no legal authority or enforcement tools against an organization that does not meet guidelines. CCAC is also funded largely by member organizations that include several industry representatives, including the Canadian Association for Laboratory Animal Science.[4] Significantly, CCAC's oversight only applies to organizations that are "CCAC-Certified" by virtue of receiving government funding or who otherwise seek voluntary certification. There are many privately funded facilities across Canada, with therefore no obligation to report on number of animals used in testing, nor are there any means by which the public can ascertain welfare standards applied towards these animals.

At the provincial level, The Animals for Research Act[5] in Ontario regulates the use of animals in research and requires licensing and compliance with CCAC guidelines. In November 2025, and following leaked footage of dogs being induced with heart attacks for cardiac studies at St Joseph's Health Care in London, Ontario[6], Premier Doug Ford introduced Bill 75 that would amend the Animals for Research Act to ban invasive research on dogs and cats and allow for adoption of animals after research use, among other proposals.[7] However, the bill is not yet law and still allows for certain exceptions to these procedures. In addition, Bill 75 does not alter or repeal provisions of the Act that allow for research facilities to purchase dogs and cats from animal pounds once a minimum hold period has expired.[8]

Changing Horizon

The outcry over the St Joseph dogs lends to a growing shift in public opinion and concern over animals being used in medical experiments today. This coincides at a time where improved technological capabilities are enabling scientists to reduce their reliance on animals, and these "New Approach Methodologies" are offering hope that procedures on live animals will eventually phase out. Examples of some animal-free alternatives gaining traction include the following –

- Organ-on-a-chip: a microfluid device lined with living cells that replicate the structure and function of human organs.

- Human-derived models: use of human cells and tissues, such as 3D bioprinted models that can simulate human physiological responses.
- Computer modelling and simulation: increasingly effective in predicting how different substances will behave in human bodies.

Toronto Humane Society encourages the Federal government to identify and fund initiatives that reduce the use of animals in medical and research testing. Simultaneously, the THS urges the government to establish new and robust national legislation governing animal-based research that promotes animal welfare and includes legal language prioritizing non-animal approaches. This may stimulate government efforts to fund replacement methods, as well as assign a government ministry or department to take responsibility for administration and enforcement of rules – replacing the CCAC and giving Canadians a mechanism by which they can raise concerns over animal testing practices. With new and emerging technologies increasingly available, a more humane approach to research and science is possible.

Supporting Resources

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