

Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium

Introduction

The signatories to this Agreement are all involved in carrying out, funding or supporting animal research in some way. Fundamental research using animals has helped us to understand the way the body works, and research using animals still plays an essential role in medical, pharmaceutical, veterinary and scientific progress. To improve the health and welfare of both humans and animals, we need to continue carrying out biomedical research. While there is continuing investment in the development of alternatives to the use of animals in research, for the foreseeable future an important part of this work will continue to require the use of animals.

In April 2016, 22 Belgian organisations involved with life science research signed a Declaration, co-ordinated by the [European Animal Research Association \(EARA\)](#) and the [Belgian Council for Laboratory Animal Science \(BCLAS\)](#), on Openness on Animal Research. Following this Declaration, steps were taken to develop it into the current proposal for a Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium. The objective of this Agreement is to ensure that members of the Belgian public receive accurate and up-to-date information about a) what animal research involves b) how such research is regulated in Belgium c) the role it plays in the overall process of scientific discovery, treatment development and regulatory testing d) the efforts researchers and staff undertake in support of animal care and welfare and e) what is done to reduce animal usage and minimise suffering and harm to research animals.

In summary, the signatories to this Agreement want people to be able to access a comprehensive body of information about animal research so that they can debate the issues from a position of knowledge and understanding of the facts so that they can make up their own minds about animal research.

About the Agreement

The life sciences sector in Belgium has long been committed to undertaking world-leading research and to maintaining and continuing to improve high standards of animal welfare.

We recognise that we have an obligation to demonstrate and promote these values, entirely in line with the European Directive 2010/63/EU on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes and the here from derived local legislation. Further background information on the regulation in Belgium is available at the end of this document.

We recognise and respect the fact that some people are opposed to, or uncertain whether to support, the use of animals in research. For people to make up their own minds on this issue we feel that they should be provided with clear and honest information on the benefits of the research to humans and animals, and any harms to the animals used in research. We also recognise that, to be seen as trustworthy we must be open, transparent, and accountable for the research that we conduct, fund or support, including when the high standards we strive for are not achieved. This means doing more to communicate the context in which animal research takes place; the work that organisations undertake in the 3Rs (Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of animals in research); the regulations that govern this research, and the systems that are in place to report and rectify poor practice. The Commitments in this Agreement will help to address this.

The Agreement comprises **Four Commitments**, each underpinned by practical steps that organisations can or may undertake. Exactly how the Commitments are fulfilled will differ between organisations depending on their operation and purpose, their resources and their different legal obligations. Research funders, organisations conducting animal research, representative and membership bodies, all have different roles to play. Some signatories already have systems and structures in place to help them to fulfil the Commitments, and there are already many examples of good practice in openness on animal research (e.g. playing an active role in communicating about animal research to the media, inviting key stakeholders to their animal facilities and having clear and elaborate information readily available on their websites). Others, however, may have some way to go before they can take the practical steps as outlined in the Agreement. Nevertheless, all signatories commit to making progress towards implementing the Agreement and helping to increase openness on the use of animals in research in Belgium. Signatories will report annually on their progress in each of the Commitments.

The four commitments

Commitment 1: We will be clear about when, how and why we use animals in research

This Commitment seeks to ensure that all organisations acknowledge, both internally and externally, that they or their members carry out, or fund animal research. It also seeks to ensure that they are transparent about the use of animals in that research. All signatories are expected to agree to these basic principles of openness, which underpin the whole of the Agreement.

When we communicate about the use of animals in research, we should provide accurate descriptions of the benefits, harms and limitations of such research, be realistic about the potential outputs of such research, and be open about its impact on animal welfare and the ethical considerations involved.

We will take steps to ensure that staff (and students, where relevant) are aware of our organisation's involvement with or support for the use of animals in research in Belgium. We will be prepared to provide information explaining our involvement with the use of animals in research in Belgium, and will be prepared to respond to reasonable questions about the nature (i.c. the type of animal research) we support. Where there are reasons not to respond to questions (e.g. proprietary intellectual property), we will explain those reasons to the enquirer.

Where signatories to the Agreement are working together on a research project, all the relevant parties will agree to take an open approach to communications about the (number of) animals used for research purposes and to support their partners in this. Where there are partnerships with non-signatory organisations or there are issues of confidentiality, protection of IP or commercial sensitivity, signatory organisations will be as open as possible in sharing information with the public, while respecting these constraints.

Commitment 2: We will enhance our communications with the media and the public about our research in Belgium using animals

The purpose of this Commitment is to ensure that relevant details about signatories' involvement in the use of animals in Belgian research are readily accessible by the public. It builds on Commitment 1. by outlining some of the practical steps that organisations can or may take to facilitate their communications around animal research.

Within one year of signing up to the Agreement, we will make a policy statement available via our own publicly accessible website about the use of animals in research, to provide clear information about the nature of our own involvement with animal research and its role in the wider context of our research aims.

Signatory universities, pharmaceutical companies, learned societies and research funders will report and/or explain on their institutions website and through other communication channels, how they are working to promote better application of the 3Rs (Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of animals in research) and will make examples of their progress in the 3Rs, including initiatives to develop alternative methods. Where animal research has played a significant role in a scientific advancement and/or product development, we will include information about that animal research in relevant communications. This information will be linked to a central portal publicly available on the websites of the *Belgian Council for Laboratory Animal Science* and *Infopunt Proefdieronderzoek*.

Signatories will support and encourage researchers and staff who wish to engage with the public and media, where this does not conflict with normal operational procedures. We will identify a point of contact for information about the organisation's involvement in the use of animals in research and will aim to provide one or more spokespeople to talk about this topic.

Signatories will encourage researchers to follow acknowledged good practice when publishing the results of their animal research (e.g. the principles enshrined in the [ARRIVE guidelines](#)).

Signatories to the Agreement may, as some already do, allow access to their facilities in Belgium for groups of accredited journalists and media organisations,

policy makers, as well as local schools, and patient organisations. The public and media may consider access to animal research facilities as a pledge of good faith but need to be informed that such visits are not always possible and need to be limited in order to avoid additional stress to the animals.

Commitment 3: We will be proactive in providing opportunities for the public to find out about research using animals and the regulations that govern it.

This Commitment aims to encourage more public discussion in Belgium about animal research. It builds on Commitments 1. and 2. by suggesting ways in which signatories can engage proactively – directly and indirectly – with the public, over and above the provision of information.

We will work co-operatively to provide more comprehensive explanations of animal use in research and laboratory animal welfare procedures. These explanations could, where appropriate, include images and films; they could be presented either as stand-alone materials or accompanying other communications and should include information about the context of the research. The development of an institution's website will make a significant contribution to this effort.

Where relevant, in any talks or public events they take part in - for example at schools or with the local community - representatives of the signatories will include information about the role of animals in their work and what they do to promote a better application of the 3Rs (Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of animals in research). Signatories will also consider ways in which they can facilitate activities that will encourage public engagement with the issue of animals in scientific, veterinary, pharmaceutical and medical research.

Commitment 4: We will report on progress annually and share our experiences

Monitoring the implementation of the Agreement will be important for its success. We want to be able to demonstrate and share the progress we have made towards being more open about research using animals in Belgium and improving the information that is available to the public. We will also review the Agreement and our own processes to keep them up to date.

We will report annually to the [Belgian Council for Laboratory Animal Science](#), [Infopunt Proefdieronderzoek](#) and other local network organizations such as e.g. the [Vlaamse Interuniversitaire raad \(VLIR\)](#) on actions we have chosen to take in order to fulfil these Commitments and will share our experience of the effectiveness and impact of the strategies we have adopted.

We believe that the Agreement will give its signatories the opportunity to come together to share and promote good practice in being open about animal research and in providing the public with better insights into the reasons for, methods of, and progress resulting from, the use of animals in research.

Three years after publication, we will review this Agreement and its impact and amend the document as necessary.

Background information on Belgium regulation

In developing this Agreement, the original signatories to the April 2016 Statement began discussions to formalise the Statement into the current proposal for a Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium which involved consultation with a wider stakeholder group. These discussions have also been influenced by progress in the UK, Spain and Portugal, countries that have in place, or have just launched national transparency agreements on communicating animal research.

Animal research in Belgium is regulated by the regional governments (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels), which control the licensing of animal research facilities and regularly inspect animal research establishments. Each research project using animals is subject to prior evaluation and authorisation of local ethical committees, that need to have legally imposed competences and compositions. Each application for a project licence must include a summary of the research that will be carried out, written in language that non-specialists can understand. These Non-Technical Summaries are publicly available on the websites of the respective authorities. The legislation also requires every animal research establishment to submit information on their animal use each year, which is published in summary form in an annual

report, including the number of animals used and the actual severity of the animal experiments. The regional information can be found here:

- For Flanders:
<https://www.lne.be/cijfers-en-statistieken-dierenwelzijn>.
- For Brussels:
https://environnement.brussels/sites/default/files/user_files/statistiques_utilisation_des_animaux_dans_les_experiences_en_region_bruxelloise_en_2016.pdf
- For Wallonia:
<http://bienetreanimal.wallonie.be/home/animaux/autres-animaux/animaux-dexperience.html#statistiques>

The signatories to this Agreement operate under applicable Belgian and EU law. This means that animals must not be used if alternative research methods are available that produce comparable data to those obtained from using animals in research; that the numbers used should be kept to a minimum necessary to conduct statistically robust research; and that researchers must ensure that any pain or distress, whether physical or psychological, is minimised. We want the public to have accurate information and to have a realistic view of both the harms caused to animals and the benefits of animal research.

THE STATUS OF THE AGREEMENT

This Agreement has been developed proactively and is supported by its signatories in addition to their legal and regulatory obligations in Belgium. Organisations that sign up to it are expected to work towards fulfilling the four commitments. If an organisation finds that it is unable to make any progress, it will be asked to reconsider its position as a signatory to the Agreement.

All signatories agree to take steps to be more open about their use of animals in research. Further information is given in the accompanying Guidance Document to explain how different kinds of organisation could work towards fulfilling the Commitments. Some actions are expected to be fulfilled by all signatories, but others will depend on the primary role of the signatory.