Alternatives to Animal Experimentation –
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow:
Some Thoughts on Leaving ECVAM

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In April 1993, I left my position in the
University of Nottingham Medical
School to become the first head of
ECVAM, the European Centre for the
Validation of Alternative Methods, a unit
of the Environment Institute, part of
the European Commission (EC) Joint
Research Centre (JRC), located at Ispra,
among the north-west Italian lakes.

At that time, I had little idea of what
Ispra would be like, no knowledge of
what the JRC did, and absolutely no
conception of what it would be like to be
a European civil servant. I had a great
deal to learn.

I left ECVAM in June 2002, a year
before my official retirement date, so
that my successor could lead ECVAM
throughout the whole of the 6th
Framework Programme, which will run from
2003-2006, and which will fund the
work of the JRC, as well as the numerous
international research programmes
funded by the Commission.

I must leave it to others to consider
the extent to which ECVAM succeeded
or failed during its first ten years or so,
but which involve fewer animals or
which entail less painful procedures”.

When I arrived, validation was a rather
ill-defined concept and very few people
had any significant experience of its
practical application, although some of
us were learning many useful lessons
as we managed the EC/Home Office
validation study on alternatives to the
Draize eye irritation test. The regulatory
acceptance of replacement alternative
methods was a far-away dream.

When I left ECVAM, much had been
learned about validation in practice, and
the first scientifically validated in vitro
alternative methods for chemicals testing
had been accepted into European Union
legislation and were well on the way to
acceptance into the OECD Test Guidelines
Programme. Now that we know
how the validation process works, it
should, in future, be possible to speed
up the transition of alternative methods
from development to acceptance and
application.

I am also very pleased that ECVAM
has been able to play a useful role in
the application of the Three Rs in the
production and testing of biologicals
(Halder et al., 2002).

There have been many highlights
along the way, including the ECVAM
Opening Symposium, held on 18 Octo-
ber 1994 (Balls & Blaaubooer, 1995)
and the ECVAM Status Seminar, held
on 4-6 June 2002 (Balls, 2002). The
ECVAM workshop series is proving to
be invaluable (Combes, 2002), but no
other workshop has surpassed the signif-
icance of the workshop on The Three Rs:
The Way Forward (Balls et al., 1995).
Jointly organised with CAAT, workshop
11 took place in Sheringham, in the UK,
in 1995, in the presence of William
Russell and Rex Burch. This was the first
meeting they had attended together since
the publication of The Principles of
Humane Experimental Technique in
1959 (Russell & Burch, 1959). Sadly, it
was also to be the last, since Rex Burch,
already very ill at the time, died a few
months later.

Happily, Bill Russell was able to be
present on another great occasion, the
acceptance with acclamation of The
Three Rs Declaration of Bologna (Anon,
2000) on 31 August 1999, in the Aula
Magna of the University of Bologna,
during the 3rd World Congress on Alter-
natives and Animal Use in the Life
Sciences (Balls et al., 2000).

There were, of course, many other
highly memorable, but less public,
occasions and interactions. Not least
among these were the meetings of the
ECVAM Scientific Advisory Committee
(ESAC), wisely set up by the Commis-
sion when establishing ECVAM, and
where much of ECVAM’s work was planned. In time, as the result of a suggestion by the Environment Directorate General of the Commission, endorsement of a method by the ESAC as scientifically valid and ready for consideration for regulatory use or for other purposes, became recognized as a crucial step in the acceptance of an alternative method or strategy within the EU.

Then there was ECVAM’s amazing complex of academic, industrial, administrative, governmental and animal welfare contacts and collaborators, which made us focus on what would be relevant in the real world. Perhaps it is unwise to select one or two of them for a specific mention, but such progress as has been made would not have been possible without effective partnerships with COLIPA, the EDQM, ERGATT, the IIVS, RIVM and the PEI, and the University of Nottingham, and companies such as L’Oreal, Syngenta and Unilever. But, above all, there were FRAME and ZEBET.

I accepted the position at ECVAM on two conditions, both of which were agreed, namely, that Julia Fentem should be able to join me, and that I should be able to retain my positions as Chairman of the Trustees of FRAME and Editor of ATLA. Julia’s work at ECVAM was outstanding, and served as her passport to greater things. FRAME supported me at ECVAM in many ways, and especially via the publication of ECVAM reports and ESAC statements in ATLA. Despite what some have thought, this was at great financial cost to FRAME, which has received very little of ECVAM’s external funding.

ZEBET has been a very special partner for ECVAM, particularly in the management of the successful validation studies on in vitro methods for phototoxic potential and for embryotoxicity, but also for the times when Horst Spielmann and I felt together, but somewhat alone, in a rather hostile world.

That having been said, being the Head of ECVAM was very tough, and, when I took up my position in 1993, I had not realized that there would be so many stumbling blocks placed in our path, or such a lack of support from many individuals and organisations whose active encouragement should have been guaranteed. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised, seeing the way in which human beings run their affairs. I could easily be convinced that chimpanzees or golden retrievers could do a better job of running the world.

So, what of the future?

I want to reaffirm my conviction that ECVAM has a vital role to play as the Three Rs concept is developed and applied throughout an expanding EU and beyond, but by encouraging, facilitating and collaborating, rather than seeking to control or dominate.

In particular, I hope that ECVAM:
1) will be given adequate staffing and financial support;
2) will retain both scientific and humanitarian perspectives and activities;
3) will continue to insist on the highest scientific standards;
4) will not accept dual standards for the development/validation/acceptance of animal/non-animal tests;
5) will not focus entirely on the new EU Chemicals Policy, despite the golden opportunity it offers for alternative methods (see Worth & Balls, 2002), but will retain activities related to medicines, biologicals and cosmetics, as well as chemicals;
6) will further develop its many collaborations, especially those outside the EU, with ICCVAM and the OECD;
7) will set reasonable targets and establish strategies for achieving them;
8) will stand up for what is right (e.g. the adoption and active pursuit of the zero option on the use of non-human primates), and oppose what is wrong (e.g. current policies on endocrine disruptors and the production and use of transgenic animals); and
9) will preserve its relative independence and maintain its momentum.

I want to wish my successor, Thomas Hartung, every success as he builds on what has been achieved at ECVAM so far, and to ensure him of my support and assistance, should he ever need them. We have worked together on a number of occasions, and he has actively collaborated with a number of ECVAM’s excellent young researchers. He has one major advantage over me – he will find it much easier to read all ALTEX!

I can’t say that I miss being an administrator in the Commission, but I do miss the day-to-day contact with my loyal friends at ECVAM, whom I had the great privilege to lead for a while.

Living in Italy was a joy, but I am glad to be back home in an especially beautiful part of England, just a mile or two from where Rex Burch spent the last thirty years or so of his life. I now intend to devote my remaining years to FRAME, and especially to ATLA, ALTEX’s sister journal, in spreading our conviction that “humane science is a prerequisite for good science, and is best achieved in relation to laboratory animal procedures by the vigorous promotion and application of the Three Rs” (Anon, 2000).

The Three Rs should serve as a unifying concept, a challenge, and an opportunity for reaping benefits of every kind – scientific, economic and humanitarian.

References
Zum Artikel von Kay Brune in ALTEX 19, 3, 2002

Tierversuche in der Wissenschaft:
Sadistischer Unsinn oder Notwendigkeit?

Toni Lindl, Manfred Schmitt und Manfred Völkel


Bei den vielen auf der Welt durchgeführten Versuchen wird es sicherlich einen bestimmten Prozentsatz geben, der eine Hilfe für die Menschheit war und ist. So wie das sprichwörtliche blinde Huhn nach genügend langer Zeit des Pickens auch ein Korn findet, kann sich auch bei den Atemmilionen von Tierexperimenten ein Erfolg einstellen. Diese Ergebnisse sollten aber nicht überbewertet werden und rechtfertigen keinesfalls die derzeit immer noch zu lasche Handhabung der rechtmäßigen und tatsächlichen Voraussetzungen zur Durchführung von Tierversuchen.


Der australische Facharzt für Magen und Dünn-Erkrankungen, Barry J. Marshall, hatte in einem Selbstversuch die Heliobacter pylori Bakterien. „Seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg“, so Marshall, „forschte man schon auf diesem Gebiet, aber niemand hatte bisher versucht, diese Magenkrankheiten zu heilen. ... Mein Selbstversuch war..."