COMECE: Human embryonic stem cells no alternative to animal testing

Animal protection: Tests using human embryonic stem cells must not be considered as an alternative to animal testing

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The Council of Ministers of the European Union is about to formally adopt a draft directive for the protection of animals used for scientific purposes, with the aim of strengthening the protection of animals. COMECE welcomes this initiative as there is no doubt that animal protection is an ethical question, particularly for Christians.

COMECE is however deeply concerned by Article 4, paragraph 1 of the draft directive. In order to protect animals, the text to be adopted stipulates that, whenever possible, a scientific method or testing strategy, which does not entail the use of living animals, shall be used as an alternative.

This general wording would allow, for example, tests using human embryonic stem cells. Thus, some Member States which have no explicit legislation on human embryonic stem cells could be obliged under this legislation to apply testing methods involving such ethically contentious cells.

This provision in the draft directive therefore raises the question as to whether the EU's animal protection policy glosses over the fundamental difference between animals and the dignity of humans beings.

COMECE therefore calls on the Council to explicitly exclude from the alternative testing methods any which involve the use of human embryonic and foetal cells, respecting Member States' competences regarding their own ethical decisions.

COMECE furthermore calls on the EU legislative body and on the European Commission to engage in honest and open debate, both with regard to the scientific alternatives (for example, the use of other, non-embryonic human stem cells), and also to the fundamental ethical question as to whether society sanctions the destruction and instrumentalisation of human embryos in order to minimise animal testing.