

ORAL QUESTION TO COMMISSIONER DAVID BYRNE

By Caroline Lucas Tabled 31/01/01

Subject: Testing on animals

The possibility that a new European Chemicals Policy might require a large programme of testing on animals is a cause of grave concern to very many people in Europe.

The current system requires that a standard set of tests is completed before any safety assessment is carried out, and lacks a clear strategy for minimising animal testing. Would the Commissioner agree that a new system is required that is based on a step-wise approach, so that tests for properties with the most significant risk management implications are conducted first, avoiding inconsequential animal testing? Furthermore, would he not agree that before any additional animal tests are considered, full use should be made of all existing information, including evidence of safety-in-use (which may cover many years of use by the public), structure-activity analysis and other non-animal test methods and that wherever appropriate, the Precautionary Principle should be rigorously applied?

Reply to oral question 108. H-0104/01

By Mrs Caroline Lucas February 2001

The Commission is indeed considering the issue of the safety of chemical substances. It is particularly concerned that the majority of the chemical substances now on the Community market were first marketed before 1981, when the requirement for fuller information on toxicological and ecotoxicological properties was introduced for new chemicals. Therefore the market is dominated by substances for which there is no or insufficient data to demonstrate their safety. This situation should be improved, as serious damage to human health has already occurred in the case of asbestos where workers were exposed.

Against this background, it is necessary to consider how to improve the protection of human health and the environment. In so doing, the Commission will balance the need for more information against its commitment to limit animal testing. Where appropriate, the necessary test programme would have to be minimised by promoting use of the approaches proposed by the Honourable Member. Furthermore, test requirements may be reduced for substances neither used by the general population nor released into the environment. The precautionary principle will of course be applied as appropriate.

The use of animals in the resulting test programme should be minimised through use of existing alternative testing methods and continuing development of new alternative methods. The Commission is committed to the objective of refinement, reduction and replacement of animal testings as is shown in its research programmes, in particular the Quality of Life Programme, and in the activities carried out by the Joint Research Centre, specifically at the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods which validates alternative methods. This is supported by Community legislation requiring that, where equivalent methods exist, that using the minimum number of animals shall be chosen. The forthcoming White Paper on chemical strategy will also reflect this priority.

The Honourable Member will see that the Commission is seeking to balance animal welfare considerations against the potentially serious threats to human health and the environment, including wild animals, presented by insufficiently tested chemicals.

