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‘Safety’ Testing of Products for Human Use: Irrefutable necessity or morally indefensible false sense of security?¹

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Summary

This paper discusses the harmful and fatal use of non-human animals in so-called safety testing of products that are destined for human use (the same principles would be applicable to those destined for other animals). It argues and demonstrates that such use is not scientifically valid if the results are applied to humans. Moreover, not only does this testing result in extreme suffering and death for non-humans, dependence on this has also caused substantial harm to humans. Alternatives to such use are discussed in the context of being more defensible morally and scientifically.

Keywords: alternative, animal welfare, compassion, ethics, kindness, morality, non-human animal, scientific method, species differences, toxicity testing

Virtually anything which is ingested by, injected into or applied onto humans, or which may accidentally come into contact with them, is ‘safety’ tested by using and killing millions of non-human animals (animals³) annually. This includes therapeutic agents such as antibiotics, personal hygiene preparations, cosmetics, household cleaners and industrial solvents, to name a few. The same holds true for products which are used in the environment such as pesticides, fertilisers and machine lubricants.

There are several parameters used in testing these substances: chronic toxicity, carcinogenicity, teratogenicity and acute toxicity. In this paper, I will address only two of the methods used in the last category. The principles with respect to unreliability and the concerns for animal welfare and morally defensible behaviour by humans are the same in all cases.

Acute toxicity testing almost always is associated with extreme pain and suffering because of the very nature of the tests used. Anaesthetics or analgesics are *not* used. Two of the ways in which a substance is evaluated for its acute effects are the lethal dose 50% (LD₅₀) and topical irritancy tests⁴. Surviving animals generally are killed at the termination of the tests.

The LD₅₀ typically involves the administration, by injection or forced ingestion, of various doses of the material to groups of animals⁵. Two or more species of animals and as many as several hundred each may be used for every substance or concentration of substance tested. The dose at which 50% of the animals die is called the LD₅₀ and is generally expressed as the amount of the material per unit of body weight. Sometimes the material is not very toxic and the animals die from the volume of the material forced into their stomachs. The animals who die, often after agonising illness, may be considered the lucky ones. Those who become sick and do not die suffer longer. Depending on the material being tested, the animals may experience severe abdominal pain, muscle cramps, convulsions, vomiting, diarrhoea, gastrointestinal ulcers with bleeding, loss of kidney function, or other painful or distressing conditions.

1 The intent of this brief review is to demonstrate that reliance on animals is unnecessary, as well as immoral, to ensure a product is safe for human use. Although this document is not being regularly updated and some of the references may be considered 'dated', the arguments made are still valid for this issue. Additional strong moral arguments against subjecting non-consenting beings to harm and death is the subject of another manuscript ([Buyukmihci 2022-12-01](#)).

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3 Purely for the sake of convenience, I may refer to animals other than humans as "animals", recognising that all are animals of one kind or another; there is no intention to imply that any, even a human, is morally superior or intrinsically more valuable than another.

4 [Bosshard 1985](#); [Draize et al 1944](#)

5 [Sperling & McLaughlin 1976](#); [Zbinden & Flury-Roversi 1981](#)

The problem with this test, besides one of abject inhumanity, is that the numbers generated essentially are meaningless. The LD₅₀ is a statistical value which is valid only for the exact conditions under which it was derived and only for the animals in whom it was determined⁶. Changes in ambient temperature, degree of stress, or amount of food or water, for example, can alter the LD₅₀ by ten times or more. Furthermore, the LD₅₀ changes drastically from one species to another or even from one strain to another of the same species. The LD₅₀ of a substance in rabbits or rats in no way is an indicator of the acute toxicity of the substance in a human. Drug interactions, a common problem in the clinical setting, are not addressed by this test. Moreover, a number indicating 50% *mortality* has minimal clinical relevance. A minimum lethal dose or a maximum tolerated dose, in *humans*, would have much more meaning to the practising physician. Data of this type can easily be obtained from various poison control centres⁷. There are other alternatives for this and other types of toxicity tests, as well⁸.

In the Draize eye irritancy test, *any* compound which might intentionally or by accident gain access to the eye is tested by being placed onto the eyes of conscious, restrained rabbits. The animals are observed over a period of several days to see if there is an adverse reaction to the substance. There may be no reaction or there may be irritation ranging from minor to severe. In the worst situation, the cornea may ulcerate and perforate. Because the cornea is one of the most sensitive tissues in the body – rich in nerve endings – irritation or ulceration produces considerable pain. The rabbits usually are restrained in stocks which hold the animals by the neck and prevent them from rubbing their eyes. They cannot, therefore, in any way mitigate the discomfort or pain produced by the material placed in their eyes.

As an ophthalmologist and scientist, it is my professional opinion that the Draize eye irritancy test has little, if any, relevance to human safety. It is fraught with technical and biological problems which make extrapolation of results to the human situation not only tenuous, but also dangerous. It is the subject of a brief review by me elsewhere⁹. The same problems compromise the 'usefulness' of the skin irritancy tests done on animals. In these, the animals are shaved and a substance is held in contact with the skin using a bandage. The area is examined later to determine if there was irritation. Depending on the substance tested, there can be substantial corrosion of the skin.

From a practical standpoint, therefore, the tremendous suffering which some of the animals must endure in toxicity tests is unnecessary. Their misery in no way guarantees the safety of humans.

There are numerous alternative methods to obtain data to predict whether a particular material will be safe for human use¹⁰; see also the cited information in the paper on the Draize test¹¹. So-called organs-on-a-chip are particularly of interest¹² as is the VPRMPT project at Vanderbilt University¹³. These various alternative methods are more reliable and more humane than tests

6 [Kaufmann \[sic\] & Cohen 1987](#); [Morrison et al 1968](#); [Sperling & McLaughlin 1976](#); [Zbinden & Flury-Roversi 1981](#)

7 [Werner 1983](#)

8 [Bassi et al 1993](#); [Ciapetti et al 1992](#); [Dierickx & Ekwall 1992](#); [Fiskesjö & Levan 1993](#); [Grundt & Nyland 1992](#); [Hazard 1993](#); [Kerszman 1993](#); [Mäkelä & Isomaa 1992](#); [Peloux et al 1992](#); [Sapora et al 1993](#); [Sbarbati-Del Guerra et al 1993](#); [Schambye et al 1992](#); [Valentino et al 1993](#)

9 [Buyukmihci 2023](#)

10 [Andrews 2014](#); [Anon 1989-01-01,2016-12-01,2022-08-28](#); [Arenholt-Bindslev et al 1992](#); [Babich & Borenfreund 1989](#); [Bigelow 2014](#); [Boue-Grabot et al 1992](#); [Carrara et al 1992](#); [Cook et al 1992](#); [Douglas 1982](#); [Evans et al 2009](#); [Henderson 2010](#); [Kruszewski et al 1992](#); [Mackar & Spencer 2011](#); [Neves et al 2013](#); [Pitman 2014](#); [Renzi et al 1993](#)

11 [Buyukmihci 2023](#)

12 [Anon 2007-12-17,2019-08-14](#); [Benam et al 2016](#); [Clark 2015](#); [Kremen 2010](#); [Ma et al 2015](#)

13 [Anon 2016-11-19](#)

using animals. In some cases the methods only represent a refinement in the test or a reduction in the numbers of animals used and are unacceptable morally. In other cases, however, there is evidence that a total replacement, using a number of *in vitro* tests, is possible.

It often is stated that a proposed alternative to an animal-based test must first be 'validated'. This means that the proposed alternative must be reasonably close in predicting what would be the result using the animal test. There are at least two systematic errors with this approach. One, as mentioned, is that available data indicate many of the standard tests such as the Draize test are not reliable indicators of human reactivity. Another is that, to my knowledge, there has been no validation of the standard tests themselves. They have been accepted as the standard with no rigorous attempt at verifying their reliability. Therefore, although it is true that new methods of determining toxicity should be 'validated', the standard should be against known reactions to various categories of substances by *humans*, not other animals.

From a scientific and human safety perspective, results from toxicity tests on animals largely are irrelevant, unpredictable and potentially dangerous because people would tend to react differently to many substances¹⁴. One example is the case of paraquat¹⁵. This chemical was introduced in 1960 as a herbicide. It was believed to have low toxicity because the LD₅₀ in the rat was 120 mg/kg body weight. By 1972, however, more than 400 people had died from exposure to this chemical. From these tragic deaths, it was estimated that the lethal dose in humans was as little as 4 mg/kg body weight.

In addition, this type of testing cannot predict individual or familial tendencies for adverse reactions. For example, the antibiotic chloramphenicol is relatively safe in animals, but causes illness and death from aplastic anaemia in susceptible people. The amount necessary to do this in some individuals is so small that even the tiny amount applied through eye ointments can be fatal¹⁶.

Ironically, products are still manufactured and distributed for human use even though they are demonstrated to be toxic to animals. For example, during 'safety' testing of the artificial sweetener saccharin, it was found that rodents developed cancer. Despite this, the test results were, in essence, ignored, and the product was marketed, albeit with a warning label. Perhaps thousands of animals suffered and were killed for a trivial, non-essential product, and the data generated were pre-empted by economic interests.

In another example, a nail polish remover containing acetonitrile, which was tested on animals, was released for use and resulted in the death of a human child¹⁷. The acute toxicity data with respect to this chemical's effects on rodents were reported in the article, but were of no use to the child who succumbed to the chemical.

In yet another example, a tuberculosis vaccine that failed in non-human primates was still given to human babies¹⁸.

It would be far more pragmatic and reliable to gain data by learning from the numerous

14 Anon [1991-09-17,2022-08-28](#); [Baldrick 2011](#); [Boomgaarden 2014](#); [Brinkworth et al 2012](#); [Bruner et al 1993](#); [Carter & Griffith 1965](#); [Chapin et al 1993](#); [Coleman 2011](#); [Cookson 2007](#); [Davis 1979](#); [D'Mello 1993](#); [Dorman et al 1993](#); [Eastwood et al 2010](#); [Gartner 2005](#); [Ledford 2013](#); [Makino et al 2022](#); [Mathews 2007](#); [Neergaard 1993](#); [Oksenberg et al 1992](#); [Perel et al 2007](#); [Pouliot et al 2022](#); [Pritchard 2008](#); [Roche Pharmaceuticals 2009](#); [Spearow et al 1999](#); [Vince 2006](#)

15 [Van Heijst 1991](#)

16 [Fraunfelder et al 1993](#)

17 [Caravati & Litovitz 1988](#)

18 [Newell & Malnick 2017](#)

unplanned human exposures to various substances¹⁹. Physicians deal daily with accidental poisonings or exposure of the body surfaces to various chemicals. The data generated by these observations are critical to our ability to predict what another person might expect and to develop treatment measures. We have a practical as well as moral obligation to record and centralise this information so that it can be universally shared.

What is the solution to the problem of safety testing? As with most complicated situations, there are no easy nor universally accepted answers to the question. Federal agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency, for example, have stated that they do not require nor encourage the LD₅₀. There are no regulations which require the use of the Draize test²⁰. The FDA Modernization Act will allow companies the option to use alternative, humane and human-relevant methods to test experimental drugs before human clinical trials²¹. Many companies are modifying the LD₅₀ and other tests so that the number of animals used is less²². There are numerous 'cruelty-free' products readily available. These are safe and reasonable alternatives to those tested on animals. Although some of the companies claiming to have discontinued testing their products on animals buy their raw ingredients from suppliers who still test them on animals, most such companies do not.

Much, if not most, 'safety' testing is done on products which are designed to be an 'improvement' over an existing one. Whereas this normally would be appropriate in a free enterprise system, the fact that someone – animals – must suffer and die as a result makes it unconscionable. Companies also appear to be doing this type of testing to limit their liability for complications following the use of their products. This may be, however, to little avail. The data derived from animal testing may not be admissible in court when a human brings action against a company due to injury from a particular product²³.

What can you do to reduce the pain and suffering involved in 'safety' testing? Alert others to the truth about the products they are using. When the facts are known, compassionate people will substitute cruelty-free alternatives. Alert your local market to the facts and ask them to at least carry some of the alternative products. Whereas food co-ops traditionally have been open to this, many of the large grocery chains now routinely carry such products. Make the pledge to use cruelty-free products whenever possible. Follow up by letting the producers of other products know that you have switched over and why. With increased economic pressure, there will be increased efforts by the large companies to develop cruelty-free products.

From a moral perspective, toxicity testing using animals cannot be condoned. The animals used are living, feeling creatures who are capable of suffering in ways similar to us. They have lives and interests independent of ours. There are no morally relevant differences between them and us which make it acceptable to use them for purposes to which we would not consider subjecting ourselves.

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24 In this paper, I have cited only a few references to document various points because the literature on this subject is substantial.

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