

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and scientific experiments with animals

1. The SNSF

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) is Switzerland's foremost institution in the promotion of scientific research. On behalf of the Swiss federal government, it supports research projects in all disciplines, from philosophy and biology to the nanosciences and medicine (more on the SNSF: www.snsf.ch)

To safeguard its independence as a research funding agency, the SNSF was established as a private foundation in 1952. It supports research mainly in the form of individual projects and is committed to promoting young scientists. In addition, it aims to create the best possible conditions for the international integration of Swiss research and fosters dialogue with society, politics and industry.

2. Evaluation of research projects at the SNSF

The research projects submitted to the SNSF are carefully evaluated by the National Research Council. The Research Council is composed of a maximum of 100 Swiss researchers. They have international research credentials and in-depth knowledge of the research environment. For the evaluation of proposals, the Research Council additionally considers the opinions of external (national as well as international) experts.

2.1 Assessment criteria

The key scientific assessment criteria are as follows:

- Scientific value and relevance of the project
- Originality of research objectives
- Adequacy of methodical approach
- Feasibility of the project
- Scientific track record of the applicants
- Applicants' expertise in relation to the project

2.2 The Biology and Medicine division of the Research Council

Projects in biology and medicine are evaluated by Division III of the Research Council. It is composed of 30 members. The division sets high demands with regard to the quality of research projects and funds only approximately 50% of the applications received.

Most research councillors benefit from SNSF funding for their own research projects. This is a consequence of the SNSF's endeavour to engage the best Swiss researchers for its evaluation body. Clearly defined procedures are in place as regards the submission of applications by members of the Research Council (or other conflicts of interests). The relevant research councillors do not have access to any documents concerning the evaluation of their proposal and withdraw from the corresponding discussions in the council. The SNSF may award a maximum of 5% of its total budget to members of its bodies.

2.3 Research projects with animal testing

Experiments with animals are indispensable in basic research as they provide important insights that can lead to the development of new forms of treatment. For many research questions, there are still no viable alternatives to animal testing.

Approximately 15% of investigator-driven research projects involve animal experiments or data from animal testing conducted by third parties. In 2013, the SNSF supported 651 projects that included animal testing. In total, it allocated grants worth CHF 117.5 million for such projects. Animal testing generally comprises only part of a project: approximately two-thirds of the project grant is generally used for salaries (e.g. of doctoral students), and costs for apparatuses and equipment also need to be covered. For some years now, the SNSF has not supported any experiments that cause distress to apes, not least because researchers in Switzerland have not submitted any such projects.

2.4 Transfer of funding / Ethical choices

The SNSF only transfers approved funding once it is in possession of all authorisations necessary for conducting the research - in the case of animal testing, the cantonal animal experiment permit. The SNSF relies on the judgement of the authorising bodies appointed by parliament and does not weigh the ethical choices at hand: the cantonal animal testing commissions are composed of lay-people, researchers, animal protectionists and experts on the keeping of animals. They therefore represent the diverse values prevalent in society and have the competencies needed to make ethical choices to a greater extent than the SNSF Research Council, which consists solely of researchers.

3. 3R (Replace, Reduce, Refine)

The number of animal experiments, the number of animals used and the suffering inflicted on them must be kept to a minimum. The SNSF and the researchers accept the 3R principle as an important guideline. Researchers generally develop better methods or alternative approaches with a view to achieving their research goals and rarely characterise such developments as 3R research. Therefore, the SNSF is not able to ascertain how many SNSF-funded projects are relevant for 3R. However, the number of biological and medical projects working with cell cultures is probably already higher than the number of projects involving animal testing.

The SNSF also promotes the 3R principle through the assessment criteria it applies: it refuses to fund methodically inadequate or obsolete, scientifically irrelevant or already conducted projects.

4. The SNSF and public debate

As a research funding organisation, the SNSF represents the scientific point of view in discussions about animal testing. It attaches great importance to a neutral, open, constructive and well-informed debate. With regard to research with primates, it has repeatedly encouraged precisely this. However, the SNSF distances itself from the increasing personalisation and misinformation surrounding the debate on animal testing.

August 2014