



07 OCT, 2025

Funding to find alternatives to animal testing

The Post, Wellington

Page 1 of 2

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ANIMAL WELFARE

Hanna McCallum

An anti-animal experimentation group is funding research into other options to using animals in research, with the hope of a dramatic drop in the numbers used and those harmed or killed falling to zero.

The grant is welcomed by researchers, who say they also want to see the number of animals decline, but they say animals will continue to be important for science discovery and funding for research remains a barrier.

"Nobody wants to use animals for research," Jodi Salinsky, animal welfare officer at the University of Auckland, said. "We do it because we believe that it is necessary to move forward research that is beneficial for humans, the animals or the environment."

The New Zealand Anti-Vivisection Society (NZAVS) has created a \$50,000 research grant that could support one or two research groups to develop an animal alternative method.

"I think this is an extremely positive and proactive way to work with the research community ... to get what they want – and what we all eventually want," she said.

Salinsky, who was a veterinarian for more than 20 years, does research that aims to improve the health and welfare of animals used in science.

Animals in research were well taken care of, which was important to good research, she said, while all research using animals was required to be approved by an animal ethics committee.

Unlike other countries, there was currently no dedicated public funding in Aotearoa aimed at animal alternative methods or the 3Rs – replacement, reduction, and refinement – the principles used by ethics committees to approve projects to minimise harm to animals in research.

"It's really appreciated that NZAVS would facilitate a grant for tertiary organisations, especially helpful in such a tough research funding environment."

Jade Pengelly, NZAVS executive officer, said the development of technology over the last decade was "really exciting".

But more than 300,000 animals were still being used in research each year in Aotearoa, which had only marginally dropped from 324,395 in 2000 to 316,568

in 2023.

In 2023, 45,344 animals were killed for the purpose of using their tissues for research, testing or training, while 81,443 animals died or were euthanised during or after manipulation, according to the Ministry for Primary Industries.

Another 110,565 were bred for research, testing or teaching but were euthanised because they were never used.

"It's a really high number of animals that are being killed every year in New Zealand in the name of science," Pengelly said.

She hoped the grant would encourage innovation and eventually lead to a dramatic drop in animals used in science, with the number of animals harmed or killed falling to zero. Preference for the grant would be given to proposals that demonstrated long-term impact, like curriculum reform or policies that permanently phased out animal use.

Michael Pankhurst, senior lecturer and researcher in the department of anatomy at Otago University and a board member of the Australia and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching, said the grant had the potential to make "a real impact".

The funding could support one or two research groups to develop an animal alternative method which could be used and adopted by others, he said.

Pankhurst's lab used a combination of methods including animals, cells grown in a dish, computer modelling, human studies using blood samples and donated tissues and even sheep ovaries discarded from an abattoir.

The use of alternative methods was increasing, but technology like organoids which derived from stem cells and replicated human organs or organ-on-a-chip were expensive, and limited research funding remained a significant barrier.

There were also advantages and disadvantages to both animal and non-animal methods. In many situations, it was about "picking the best technology for the question we're trying to answer", Pankhurst said. "By using a range of technologies, overall, this leads to a lower requirement on animal use, but there are still some things that we cannot do without live animal



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experimentation.
“I don’t see us completely replacing animal experiments within our lifetime. Without them, we’d be missing out on a lot of important discoveries.”
The application was open and would close in January.



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