



## Basel Declaration urges openness and dialogue

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While in Canada, many universities and institutions remain mum on their animal research activities, researchers in Europe are taking a proactive approach. There are a few possible reasons for this difference in attitude. The European research atmosphere is slightly different than that of Canada's: Certain groups of primates have a legislated right to "inherent value" for example, while no such rights exist in Canada. Whatever the reason, scientists in Germany and Switzerland have launched an [educational initiative](#) called the Basel Declaration which pledges to be more open about research and to engage in public dialogue about research.

As Nature News [reports](#):

“The public tends to have false perceptions about animal research, such as thinking they can always be replaced by alternative methods like cell culture,” says Stefan Treue, director of the German Primate Center in Göttingen. Treue co-chaired the Basel meeting, called "Research at a Crossroads", with molecular biologist Michael Hengartner, dean of science at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Outreach activities, such as inviting the public into universities to talk to scientists about animal research, "will be helpful to both sides".

I think that this is a good point that Dr. Treue brings up – the importance of dialogue cannot be understated. He also makes a good point, that alternatives like cell culture are not always viable or indeed, may not be the "alternative" that activists would hope for. Growing cells requires a hodgepodge of media to keep the culture alive. One important constituent of cell culture media is [fetal bovine serum](#), or sometimes fetal calf serum, which as the name suggests, comes from cows. [Note: FCS and FBS are by-products of the meat industry and would be otherwise wasted if not used by research]. But it is important to note that the absence of research on animals does not mean that animal products will not need to be used in research and is a prime example of how science does a poor job of communicating what it does.

[Note: it is possible to grow cells serum-free, but the cost remains prohibitive at the moment]

And, there is the simple fact that cells grown as tissue culture are just not quite the same as cells in a living body. Just ask [Mark Post](#), who's trying to create [lab-grown meat](#). Using biopsies from donor animals and tissue culture techniques, he's trying to grow enough meat to create a sausage that looks and tastes like the real thing. Dr. Post's long term goal is to create meat without needing to slaughter animals. While he's succeeded at growing a strip of pork muscle, the "meat" does not resemble anything from the grocery store. The tissue is weak and prone to cell death due to lack of stimulation and without the support of a proper vascular system to deliver nutrients uniformly.

A similar case can be made for the use of computer modeling. I think computer models are great – they drastically reduce the cost of research by allowing researchers to narrow the field of interest. But at best, computer models only reduce the number of possibilities. When it comes to testing drugs, for example, a computer model cannot predict all the effects on a substance on a whole body system. We simply don't have enough information about all the interactions that occur in the body. *Yet*.

That is not to say we should not pursue new tissue culture or modeling techniques. Quite the opposite – these techniques will improve with time and refinement. In time, they may even be sophisticated enough that human clinical trials are less reliant on animal data for safety and efficacy testing.

But in the mean time, hopefully initiatives like the Basel Declaration will foster more openness between the public and the animal research community.

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