

Takeaways of the international Pioneer-2-Policymaker conference

From the 27th till the 29th of November, the international Pioneer-2-Policymaker conference was held in Utrecht. The Dutch Transition Programme for animal-free Innovations (TPI) organised it to present the Dutch way of accelerating this transition and to instigate a true dialogue between researchers, regulators and developers. The Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality urged participants to take ownership and work together towards a system in which animal testing becomes redundant.



The more than 150 participants from 16 different countries were representatives of academia, research funders, large scale companies, start-ups, government, regulators and NGOs. This mixed group of people had a full schedule during the conference. They listened to stories about innovations and attended simulated high school or college classes. They discussed key questions on the validation and acceptance of animal-free tests and participated in conversations on closer collaborations between developers, regulators and users of animal-free tests. There was plenty of opportunity to freely connect and discuss the possibilities and challenges of animal-free testing in smaller settings.

Dialogue

The conference started on Wednesday evening with an introduction to the Dutch practice and with meeting fellow conference participants. During a lecture by transition expert Harry te Riele, people could pick a side in the discussion on animal-free innovation. Attendants could either join the "I am completely welcoming animal-free innovations"-side or side with the argument "I am well aware that there are many sensitivities, and that not everything is possible yet". The key takeaway of this exercise was to acknowledge that there are no wrong starting points in this transition. And that

change will only come about when we continually make the effort to try and understand each other's viewpoints.

Classroom

This takeaway was reinforced during the 'classroom experiment' on Thursday morning. Volunteers from the audience were invited to dress up and take on the role of respectively a patient, cleaner, activist, CEO of a big pharma company or Minister. Using only fact-based arguments the volunteers had to plead in favour or against animal-testing from the viewpoint of the role they assumed. The audience voted on the best contribution to the debate. This debate is part of a school program developed by Belgian educators which can be freely used by teachers of various school subjects.

Pioneers

Also on Thursday morning, pioneers from countries across the globe presented their innovations in animal-free test methods. Just after lunch the Willy van Heumen prize was awarded to Remco Westerink. He is head of Neurotoxicology at Utrecht University and a pioneer in research – without the use of animals – on what happens before cell death results in damage to the brain, which is relevant in, for example, Alzheimer and Parkinson research.

Volunteer testing

Microbiologist and essayist Rosanne Hertzberger surprised the audience by making a case for allowing more tests on human volunteers. Inspired by the ordeals people are willing to go through voluntarily, and often at great physical expense, for example in raising money for cancer research, Hertzberger argued we should more often “throw out the mice, and use humans instead” when we do research.

She raised a discussion by making the conference attendants pick one of four hypothetical options. They could either choose to participate in research by allowing a worm to enter your body, drink a concoction that would give you diarrhoea, use nose spray that would inflict the common cold or not participate in any of the options. This encouraged a lively debate among the audience. On Thursday night two young theatre makers took this line of reasoning even further and playfully challenged their audience by posing the question: Why shouldn't we use human material to test whether or not (chemical) substances are safe for mice?

Collaboration

To conclude the conference, Thursday night and Friday morning were dedicated to discuss in smaller groups what the conference had taught us about key components in the transition towards animal-free innovations and on what points (more) collaboration is possible. In 2020 these collaborations will be developed further and they will also serve as a starting point for three workshops that will be held at the 11th World congress on alternatives and animal use in the life sciences 2020 in Maastricht in August.

Platform

Pioneers in the transition towards animal-free innovations from all over the world will be able to connect and exchange knowledge, data and expertise on TPI.tv. This new platform makes its debut as a pilot project in January.