

Brussels, 26th August 2019

Statement of concern on the targeting of scientists by animal rights activists

The Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS), which represents more than 20,000 European neuroscientists, wishes to express its concern about the recent targeting of scientists in Turin and Parma by animal rights activists. The researchers came under attack after an animal rights group (LAV) launched an online petition at the beginning of June, addressed to the Italian Minister of Health, that attracted nearly 350,000 signatures and induced the Ministry to release the name of researchers and the full details of the approved protocol to the activists.

The researchers in Turin and Parma want to understand the neural changes induced by a stroke, one of the leading death causes worldwide, in the visual cortex. Such research will exploit “blindsight” – non-conscious abilities persisting after damage to the visual cortex – and will be essential to develop treatments for patients suffering visual loss after brain damage. Therefore, the potential societal and scientific impact of this research cannot be underestimated and deserves to be supported.

In Europe, experiments on animals are highly regulated by the European Directive 2010/63, which has been adopted in an even more restrictive form in Italy. Researchers can only resort to experiments on animals if there is no alternative available. Understanding brain activity and promoting plasticity at the level of single neurons is indispensable, and can only be pursued in animals. This provides the key missing evidence while non-invasive studies carried out on human patients are also pursued. Furthermore, the experiments have to be evaluated and approved by the ethics board of the Institution where the research will be conducted, which was the case here (both at the level of the European Research Council, Universities and the Italian Ministry of Health).

Nonhuman primates represent a very small fraction (less than 0.1%) of all animals used in biomedical research, but in some cases, the research cannot be done in another animal species. For example, monkeys share with humans a high-resolution visual system, whereas rodents have poor vision, and rely mostly on other senses (such as smell, hearing and touch) to navigate in their environment. Therefore, many studies on the visual system require nonhuman primates. Moreover, the translational value of the research findings is much higher if the results have been obtained in an animal model that is close to the human.

Neuroscientists and other scientists worldwide perform experiments on animals when there is no alternative available, to advance our knowledge and to improve medicine for numerous patients in the future, always respecting the principles of reduction, replacement and refinement. Brain disorders represent a significant burden for our society, since one third of all European citizens is affected. Rigorous scientific research, including experiments on animals if necessary, remains vital to improve the lives of millions of European citizens. Targeting neuroscientists who participate in this endeavor is denying the right of future patients with brain disorders to receive the best possible care. FENS is deeply concerned about the situation and calls for immediate action to stop the attacks on Italian neuroscientists.