

Italian parliament approves sweeping restrictions to use of research animals

The Italian parliament has voted in favour of introducing extreme restrictions in the use of animals in research — which some scientists say would halt important biomedical research in the country.

But some experts say this may contravene EU legislation – leaving the Italian government with the uncomfortable choice of either upsetting its democratically elected parliament, or upsetting the European Commission.

The dilemma arose as the government began earlier this year to prepare legislation required to adopt into national law a European Union directive covering the protection of animals for scientific purposes.

The [directive](#), which was approved in 2010 after a long battle, strikes a delicate balance between animal welfare and the needs of biomedical research. It is considered among the strictest in the world.

Earlier last month the Senate approved [a series of amendments](#) which further tighten the directive, and these were rubber-stamped yesterday by the Chamber of Deputies.

The amendments would, for example, forbid the use of non-human primates, dogs and cats in research, except in mandatory drug testing or when directly related to translational medicine. They would also forbid procedures that impose mild pain – like injections – without anaesthesia.

The legislation further prohibits the use of animals in some research areas –like xenotransplantation, where cells and tissues are transplanted between species, and addiction. “It’s terrible,” says pharmacologist Gaetano Di Chiara of the University of Cagliari, Sardinia. “Drug addiction is a major health issues and it requires research with animals.”

But physiologist Roberto Caminiti from the University of Rome La Sapienza, who chairs the Committee on Animals in Research for the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies, points out that the second article of the EU directive explicitly bars EU member states from ‘gold-plating’ the directive by adding additional restrictions.

“If the government does actually implement these changes, we will call on the EU to open a procedure against Italy – that’s for sure,” Caminiti says.

The final legislation must be in place by the end of this year.