

Italian scientists fight back on animal testing



With tear gas in the background, animal rights protesters face off Italian police in Milan while trying to disrupt a demonstration by the Pro-Test group.

Caterina Pascot

About 300 researchers and students from around Italy demonstrated in Milan on 1 June to increase awareness of the need for lab animals in biomedical research. The protest was a reply to what the researchers call a “witch-hunt” led by animal-rights activists.

“A worrying disinformation is spreading — extremism by animal-rights activists has a huge media impact,” said Heather Bondi, a neurobiology doctoral student from the University of Insubria in Busto Arsizio. “We had never thought of talking about these controversial ethical issues to people, but now it is time to oppose the false truth propagated by extremists.”

In the largest event of its kind ever held in Italy, activists marching with the slogan 'Let's fight for research, let's fight for life' were summoned near Milan's central Piazza

del Duomo by Pro-Test Italia, the Italian chapter of an organization started in response to animal-rights activism.

Speakers described how animal experiments are conducted in fields from neuroscience to surgery, and explained how clinical trials work. Among the speakers was Tom Holder, one of the founders of the first [Pro-Test group](#), based in the United Kingdom. Students wearing white coats talked to passers-by and distributed pamphlets.

About 30 animal-rights activists provided a counterpoint to the protest, shouting, "Assassins!" Police looked on to prevent verbal exchanges from growing into physical skirmishes.

Get the word out

The demonstration was triggered by acts of force by animal-rights activists, most recently on 20 April, when five members of Fermare Green Hill (Stop Green Hill), an animal-rights group focused on shutting down the [Green Hill dog-breeding facility](#) in Montichiari, [broke into an animal-research facility](#) at the University of Milan. They mixed up cage labels and animals, and left with around 100 mice and one rabbit.

"Institutions could do more. They should start a serious programme of scientific disclosure," said Bice Chini, a molecular and cell biologist at the National Research Council's Institute of Neuroscience in Milan. "Researchers should not only open their laboratories, but also give out information outside supermarkets."

Saturday's demonstration was born out of an initiative by students and young researchers who met on Facebook. "These guys realized that the public doesn't know what research is, and what we do in our laboratories," said Giuliano Grignaschi, who heads the animal care unit at the Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research in Milan, and a spokesperson for the Basel Declaration Society in Switzerland, which promotes information about animal testing. "We are guilty too, for we don't give out information, and that is why researchers today are talking with people, trying to establish a dialogue," said Grignaschi.

"I hope that, starting from today, public opinion understands who lies, because we are not assassins," said Gaia Gobbo, a graduate student in biotechnology at the University of Bologna.

Fermare Green Hill has scheduled a new demonstration on 8 June in front of the animal-research facility at University of Milan.