

Animal-rights activists ramp up campaigns in Europe

Footage from German and Italian labs makes its way to television reports.

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Michael Latz/dpa/PA

A protester outside the Max Planck Institute holds a toy monkey nailed to a cross and a sign reading 'Died for humanity' on 20 December.

Activists calling for an end to research using non-human primates have stepped up activities in Germany and Italy.

An estimated 800 animal-rights activists demonstrated in front of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen, Germany, on 20 December, calling for an end to the research with monkeys that takes place there. A smaller group maintained an all-night vigil.

Friedrich Mülln, head of the activist group SOKO Tierschutz, which organized the action, told *Nature* that the group would continue actions against the institute next year "until the department that does this research is closed down."

In September, SOKO Tierschutz, which is based in Augsburg, Germany, posted a video on its website that included material filmed secretly in the institute by a former animal carer. The footage was used in a television report that claimed malpractice in the laboratory, but a preliminary investigation commissioned in response by the Max Planck Society did not reveal systematic problems in animal welfare. The society says that the Tübingen scientists contribute importantly to global research efforts to understand the human brain.

In a similar undercover operation, an anonymous person took smartphone footage of caged monkeys in a primate laboratory at the Sapienza University of Rome. The popular show *Striscia la Notizia*, which mixes exposé with entertainment, used the footage in an 18 December report which claimed that scientists at the university conducted their work in secret and without oversight. The TV report also said that its producers contacted the Italian ministry of health and the local health office, and that neither was able to explain what the lab's experiments are about.

The university denies the accusations of lack of transparency and oversight. "The methodological details and the scientific results of all experiments are published in international scientific journals that are archived and searchable in the PubMed database of scientific literature," it said in a statement. It added that the laboratory keeps records of its use of animals and is subjected to periodic

inspections from the ministry of health and the local health office. Italy is generally seen as a strict enforcer of European Union directives on the use of animals in research (see '[Biomedicine: The changing face of primate research](#)').

Monica di Luca, a pharmacologist at the University of Milan, Italy, and president of the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies, says that the intensifying activity against researchers in Europe is “worrying”. Research using non-human primates is essential in efforts to cure psychiatric and neurological disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease, she says. Politicians are asking scientists for results, she says, “but we won’t be able to respond efficiently if pressures on researchers get too high”.

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