

Rehoming of Laboratory Animals

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For several decades now, research institutions have established projects for the placement of former laboratory animals, such as cats and dogs, with private owners. However, the rehoming of smaller experimental animals, such as rodents, is less well known. In autumn 2018, in a collaboration between the Swiss Animal Protection, SAP (Schweizer Tierschutz, STS) and the University of Zurich, a rehoming project was launched with the aim of enabling suitable rats from animal experiments to lead a new life in private ownership.

Initiatives by the research-based pharmaceutical industry and various university laboratory animal care departments, with and without the support of animal welfare organizations, provide promising examples of the successful placement of former experimental or breeding animals as pets. Studies on the success of the placement of beagles from German research institutions report, for example, that more than 90% of those who adopted a laboratory beagle would again take on a laboratory animal (e.g. Döring et al. 2017).

Rehoming has been practiced in a few laboratories on a voluntary basis for years and there are some national recommendations for the placement of laboratory animals. Nevertheless, the publication of Directive 2010/63/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council for the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes, which regulates animal testing in the EU member states, has, in recent years, stimulated efforts for the placement of laboratory animals. Two articles from this EU Directive actually describe an obligation by the respective research institutions to develop rehoming programs. In order to support laboratories and institutions in the implementation of this program, various national (e.g. in the Netherlands, by the Netherland National Committee for the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes) and international recommendations (e.g. Federation for Laboratory Animal Science Associations) have been established. For Switzerland, there is currently no national recommendation on the rehoming of laboratory animals.

The University of Zurich (UZH) is aware of the responsibility that the use of animals in research entails. This includes a responsibility for the welfare of the animals during the research, but also for the fate of the animal after the experiment. While larger laboratory animals, such as cats, have long been successfully placed with private owners by the respective research groups of the UZH, there has, to date, been no formal rehoming project for laboratory rodents at the UZH. In autumn 2018, the STS and the Friends of Rats' Club (Club der Rattenfreunde) worked together with the University of Zurich to set up a rehoming project aimed at enabling rats from animal experiments to lead a new life in private hands.

Due to experimental and legal considerations, not all laboratory animals can be placed privately. Since autumn 2018, however, about 70 rats suitable for placement have been handed over to the Friends of Rats' Club. Experimental rats are kept in groups at the UZH, socialized to humans, and their health is continuously examined. The usual laboratory rat breeds, such as Sprague Dawley, are characterized by their tolerance of same-gender groups and humans, and are therefore well-suited as pets.

The rehoming project is greatly supported by experimental animal care departments and the research groups involved. In particular, researchers, veterinarians and animal caregivers who were entrusted with the care of the placed animals, consider this a positive way to give the animals a new life as pets.

In the future, we would like to continue this project and, if possible, expand it to other small experimental animals, such as rabbits and mice.

