

Statement by Thomas Sommer
for the press conference on July 1, 2021

Prof. Thomas Sommer is the interim Scientific Director of the Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in the Helmholtz Association (MDC)

“I am very pleased that a spotlight is being shone on the issue of animal testing today. For me as Scientific Director of the Max Delbrück Center, I didn’t have to think twice when I was asked to join the transparency initiative and sign the declaration a few weeks ago.

Transparent and open communication has been extremely important to us at the MDC for many years. We provide fact-based, honest and open information about our biomedical research. For us, this means speaking clearly and unambiguously about the animal experiments that are conducted by our researchers. And we communicate just as clearly about possible alternatives to animal testing, such as *in vivo* models, organoids and stem cell technologies, as well as about the 3R principles of replacing, reducing and refining the use of animals in research. These are the pillars that underpin our work and we actively [promote their development](#). For us, all of these aspects are inextricably linked.

We tell the public what we are doing, how we are doing it, and why we are doing it.

This is how we hope to contribute to a better understanding of scientific processes in our society. We want to impart knowledge; we want to make ourselves, our work and our methods accessible; and we want to reflect on our values in conversation with society. Our aim is to initiate objective debates and thereby promote dialogue – about scientific research in general, and the issue of animal testing in particular.

I am convinced that a wider understanding of scientific work and trust in research can only be achieved through social dialogue and the highest possible level of transparency. With the current Covid-19 pandemic, we are experiencing very directly the importance of biomedical research. The new active principles that the novel mRNA vaccines are based on were developed here in Germany. We are receiving global recognition for this success. And rightly so. It is also clear that none of these vaccines could have been developed without the use of animals.

We are also currently witnessing the importance of dialogue and transparency. This is a time of increasing social polarization, a time when disinformation or even misinformation can easily find a large, receptive audience. We aim to counter this with transparency and evidence-based information. The scientific community needs and wants an informed, involved and engaged public.

At the MDC, we therefore communicate proactively and openly. We not only publish our [animal testing figures](#) every year; we also mention, especially when reporting on our biomedical achievements, our progress and our studies, whenever results have been obtained with the help of animal testing. We invite interested parties – and by that I also mean our critics – to engage in dialogue with us, for example in panel discussions with audience Q&As ([Urania 2019](#)) or in lectures ([Urania 2021](#)). During the Long Night of the Sciences in Berlin, we happily open our laboratory doors to curious adults and children, who are free to ask our researchers and animal facilities employees critical questions and to participate in debates. School groups and other visitors are also welcome at the MDC, and our researchers and animal welfare officers regularly give [interviews](#) or [open their labs](#) to the media. Furthermore, we invite representatives from politics and the media to the MDC for informative visits and background discussions on the topic of animal experiments and the 3Rs. And of course, we also use the opportunities provided by social media to communicate and engage in conversation with society. All of this has been part of our practice for years, and the experience has been positive.

Let me give you three concrete examples of how we create transparency, how we conduct this dialogue, and how it can succeed:

- In late 2020, amid a public discussion about the appointing of new members to the animal experimentation committee at the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LaGeSo) – which is the responsible authority in Berlin – we published a wide range of statements from our lab heads via our website and social media. There, they provided personal statements to explain [why we are not yet able to do away with animal testing in research entirely](#). This public action gained a lot of attention, and a number of institutions have since followed suit. We received a great deal of praise from other research institutions as well as from politicians – not to mention a great response on the internet.
- A few weeks prior to that, in November 2020, we invited members of the public to a virtual lecture and discussion as part of Berlin Science Week entitled '[Artificial Intelligence, Organoids, Animal Models – New Concepts in Biomedicine](#).' This coincided with the opening of our new [Preclinical Research Center](#) – a milestone in our efforts to make the MDC's research more animal friendly.

- In 2018, we at the MDC took a strong stand against Doctors Against Animal Experiments Germany. They wanted to present one of our researchers with the critical 'Herz aus Stein' (Heart of Stone) award, but we met this reproval head on. Almost 200 of our colleagues in science and administration publicly declared their willingness to enter into direct dialogue with the protestors, while at the same time asserting that the [personal vilification and sweeping condemnation of one of their colleagues with the presentation of this 'award' was unacceptable](#).

In the spirit of openness and transparency, the MDC has been cooperating with the information initiative '[Tierversuche verstehen](#)' (Understanding Animal Testing), led by the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany. A few weeks ago we were awarded the 'Exemplary Communications of Animal Research' seal. The MDC has been a member of the [European Animal Research Association](#) (EARA) since 2013. In December 2020 (observation period: summer 2020), the EARA carried out a [study of 1,065 websites of biomedical institutions](#) within the European Union. The MDC's comprehensive web page '[Research, animal experiments and the 3Rs](#)' scored very highly and met all the criteria.

In my view, all of this shows that transparency is possible and transparency pays off – for the benefit of medical research, democracy, and scientific progress.”

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