
Opposition filed against patent on 'humanized' apes

A broad coalition against another patent on chimpanzees
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Munich

Thirteen organisations from Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain are about to file a joint opposition against a patent on genetically engineered chimpanzees granted to the US company, Altor. Patent EP1409646 was granted by the European Patent Office (EPO) in June 2012. It allows chimpanzees to be manipulated to make their DNA similar to that of humans, and then used in pharmaceutical research. The joint opposition argues that this patent violates ethical provisions in patent law.

"While on the one hand protection of great apes gets more and more support in society, on the other hand the desire of some companies to patent chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, is a step in the opposite direction. It seems to me shocking that a company should consider a great ape as a mere technical tool. If we allow that in this day and age people in the future will look back and say: How could they??" says Jane Goodall who studied chimpanzees in the wild for many years. The opponents - Albert Schweitzer Stiftung fuer unsere Mitwelt, Deutscher Tierschutzbund, Gen-ethisches Netzwerk (GeN), GeneWatch UK, Gesellschaft für oekologische Forschung, Jane Goodall Institute, No Patents On Life!, Menschen für Tierrechte, Pro Wildlife, Schweizerische Arbeitsgruppe Gentechnologie (SAG), Schweizer Tierschutz (STS), Testbiotech and the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation (WCF), Germany - are calling for animals to be treated with more respect.

"We know great apes in particular not only suffer from pain and stress, but also exhibit evidence of consciousness akin to that of humans. Research into animal behaviour in species such as chimpanzees and bonobos has fostered a strongly emerging debate about whether these non-human and highly protected animals deserve to be given a legal status similar to that of humans. This debate is a strong signal that great apes must be treated with very high ethical standards. The Patent Office is violating basic ethical standards," says Professor Christophe Boesch for the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation.

The EPO granted three patents on genetically engineered chimpanzees in 2012, one of them for the US company, Altor BioScience. An opposition was filed against one of these patents in November 2012, and another opposition is planned for May 2013.

"There is no justification for such patents. It does not promote any medical benefit but simply aims to market laboratory animals", emphasises Dr. Brigitte Rusche, Vice President of the German Animal Welfare Association. "Genetic manipulation of chimpanzees with human DNA should not be pushed by granting patents."

The opposition also includes some criticism of Genentech, which is part of the Roche-Group and cooperates with Altor. In reaction to public discussions about the patent, a spokesperson explained that Genentech would be in favour of strict regulation of the use of chimpanzees for biomedical research however, no statement was made against the patenting of great apes. The opponents consider this statement insufficient and lacking in credibility.

Contact:

Prof Dr. Christophe Boesch, Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, Tel.: +49 (0) 341 3550 201

Marius Tünste, German Animal Welfare Association, Tel.: +49(0)228 6049619

Monica Lieschke, Jane Goodall Institute Germany, Tel: + 49 (0) 89 666 10 327,

kontakt@janegoodall.de [1]

Dr. Christoph Then, Testbiotech, Tel: +49 (0)15154638040, info@testbiotech.org [2]

Further information about participating organisations:

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