

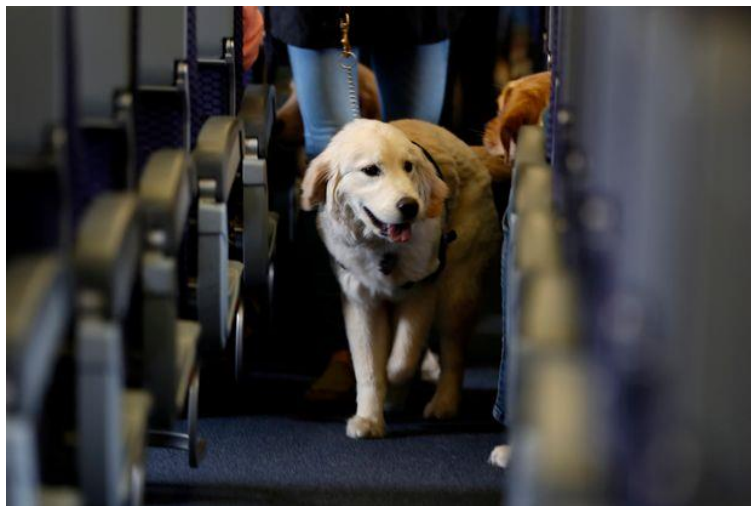
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OPINION
COMMENTARY

Unfriendly Skies for Medical Innovation

The government should order airlines to reverse policies of refusing to carry research animals.

By Richard T. Born
Nov. 17, 2019 2:24 pm ET



A service dog on a United Airlines plane, April 17, 2017. PHOTO: JULIO CORTEZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Airlines are engaged in systematic and potentially deadly discrimination—against animals. The Transportation Department should seize the opportunity to right this wrong.

Under pressure from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, most major U.S.-based commercial airlines, including United, American and Delta, have stopped transporting animals for use in medical research. So have many international passenger airlines ([British Airways](#), [China Southern Airlines](#), [Qatar Airways](#)) and most major airfreight carriers (DHL, UPS, [FedEx](#)). The same airlines, however, transport pets, zoo animals and other creatures for nonresearch purposes.

Researchers, including my colleagues at Harvard, rely on responsible, extensively monitored research on living animals to develop safe and effective treatments for

people and animals. Access to live-animal subjects is required in order to conduct this revelatory work. Laws and regulations mandate this kind of research before lifesaving medicines and treatments can be approved for use in humans.

If the government requires this research, it ought to enforce laws that prohibit discrimination against shipment of lawful cargo. The International Air Transportation Association has stated that “carriage of live animals by air is considered the most humane and expedient method of transportation over long distances.” The position the airlines have taken is thus inhumane as well as unlawful.

Most important, it threatens the progress of key research that could reduce or eradicate diseases. Polio was eradicated in the U.S. thanks to the vaccines developed by Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin. In a 1956 paper for the Journal of the American Medical Association, Sabin wrote that animal tests “were necessary to solve many problems before an oral polio vaccine could become a reality.”

Hindering animal research is also bad for the economy. According to the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the U.S. is the largest market for biopharmaceuticals, accounting for around a third of the global market, and the world leader in biopharmaceutical research and development. U.S. companies conduct the majority of the world’s R&D in pharmaceuticals and hold the patents on most new medicines. The industry accounted for more than \$1.3 trillion in economic output, representing 4% of gross domestic product, in 2015.

Unsuspecting Americans who are unaware of discrimination against medical research animals will suffer as development and production costs increase and the prices of medications rise in response to complications within the development process.

The transportation of animals is safe, legal, legitimate, necessary and essential for lifesaving biomedical research. Airlines may find it expedient to bow to political pressure, but the government shouldn’t. The Transportation Department should

enforce the law, require airlines to eliminate policies that discriminate against animal transportation, and base carriage regulations solely on the facts. Americans' health and prosperity depend on it.

Dr. Born is a professor of neurobiology at Harvard Medical School.