

Animal welfare in a new world

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At the ANZCCART conference held in Christchurch in 2003, the theme was “Lifting the Veil” and all that might entail. However, for animal welfarists the introduction of the Animal Welfare Act (1999) meant that a door was opened and we were welcomed into a world which we generally had not had access to before.

It may have been a big step for scientists to open up their previously secluded environment but it was a gigantic step for the animal welfarist appointed to an Animal Ethics Committee (AEC). For us, the scientists and their specific work was new, the language was new, the facilities were new. In some cases the species of animals were new as were the considerations required of us if we were to contribute in the way intended yet still keeping animal welfare as our prime function.

We receive the agenda of the forthcoming AEC meeting and the relevant protocols and reports with plenty of time to read them, appraise them, detail any questions we may have, perhaps research odd things and try and work out the scientific acronyms! Depending on the specific area of research and the number of applications and reports for each meeting it may take a considerable amount of a lay person's time to understand exactly what is being proposed and feel you are ready to contribute in a meaningful way.

For example, some specific points to be considered for each research application put before members of an AEC are:

- Does the expected outcome of the proposed research justify the degree of suffering the animals are expected to experience?

We are not normally given the cost/benefit analysis to this degree in our daily lives but realise it is very important and we must weigh up all the pros and cons.

- Is the outcome such that people or animals will benefit? If so, in what way and to what extent?

It is no use a scientist wanting to prove a miscellaneous idea for “science’s sake” if he is unaware of where such results may be useful now or in the future. It should contribute to solving a problem which now exists.

- Are animal models the best option for the proposed study?

We wouldn’t know but other members with such expertise within the committee should be able to enlighten us.

- Is the animal species being used in the most appropriate way to achieve the required outcome?

It is a good question, but once again we rely on the others and learn by their discussions on the subject.

- Are the least number of animals being used to provide a credible result?

Lay people usually do not have the knowledge or training to answer this but it gives you much confidence if you have a biostatistician on your committee, but no doubt discussion will take place and the proposed numbers endorsed or amended.

- Have literature searches been carried out, both to inform and to prevent duplication?

That is up to the scientist involved to declare but generally there is much additional information forthcoming from other members of the committee who are “in the know”.

- Are the proposed techniques the most appropriate?

As the scientist has already declared he has discussed it with his peer group, you have to have confidence that the correct choice has been made.

- Has full consideration been given to the use of analgesics, before, during and after the manipulation?

If they are not specified ask "Why not?" In today's world with all its technologies and scientific advancements it seems unreasonable that any animal should be expected to suffer pain without all steps possible being taken to alleviate it unless the measurement of discomfort or pain is the objective of the study.

- Are the operators well skilled in the techniques required and do they have the ability to humanely euthanase the animals if necessary?

All operators should be familiar with and hold approval for the techniques involved and this should be stated within the application.

- Are the facilities the most appropriate for the duration of the experiment?

It is expected that stainless steel and stark white benches provide excellent and efficient facilities for indoor manipulations, etc. However the natural habitat of some of the animals used is far from that and more relaxed animals may be achieved by close reconsideration of their proposed scientific environment. Those animals used in agricultural research should have appropriate shelter and housing and as these animals are often under stress during experimentation perhaps you may be able to make their environment more beneficial to them.

The previous points show that we animal welfare members of an AEC are not knowledgeable in all of the areas of expertise necessary to assure ourselves that all these criteria have been met. However we do have the ability to ask questions of those involved and we can do our own research for knowledge where practicable. Google can be most helpful! Other members of the committee, especially the Chairman, are usually willing to listen and assist. Discussions with the external veterinary member can be of great assistance for further understanding.

Although these scientific research applications can contain terms and words which lay persons find difficult to understand it is also a requirement that the

main justification and procedures must be explained in "lay" language so we are not at a disadvantage in our deliberations. This is not always easy to achieve with new and foreign scientists. Similarly it is important that overseas scientists working in New Zealand understand our animal welfare laws and the culture of preventing cruelty to all animals.

As mentioned previously we certainly are in a position to ask to see the facilities mentioned in the application and to receive assurance that the operators are well qualified for the specific procedures. Training of operators should be undertaken only with professional supervision and preferably before the manipulations take place.

Once the research is approved external members of AECs are expected to make visits in a monitoring role to observe the manipulations. This monitoring requirement also can provide us with the opportunity to discuss and suggest possible ways that may improve the animal's lot when we actually observe what is happening. Sometimes it is not a situation that we have experienced before and what we see can be somewhat disturbing. But with time one comes to accept that everything possible is being done to alleviate any suffering and either other animals or the human race may benefit from the results achieved.

Special Operating Practices should be developed, approved by the AEC, and applied to relevant procedures. Minimum standards and good practice are expected but additional factors over and above these could result in a raising of the standards and contribute to better animal welfare generally.

It is science itself which has the opportunity to continue to establish improved techniques and equipment and also advance alternatives to the use of animals in research, testing and teaching.

Because of the confidentially expected to be kept by all members of an Animal Ethics Committee, we do not have the opportunity to discuss outside of the Ethics Committee environment any aspect of the work being undertaken and nor must we impart to others any comment etc which may acknowledge any area of research being carried out, nor allow recognition of any individual involved in the process. Any information must only be released by the Institution if it wishes to do so and once research results are published in recognised journals the information is then available in the public domain. In New Zealand,

the information on numbers of animals used is published by the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC) in their Annual Report.

Perhaps you may wonder why the confidentiality is so extensive. As well as there probably being academic ownership of the research and expected royalties for the scientist and/or institution involved there have been, as some of you are no doubt aware, instances of threatening demonstrations and illegal actions taken by extremists who feel there should be a blanket ban on any manipulation of any kind on any animal and in some cases the wellbeing of scientists and anyone associated with animal research has been very much compromised. This is not an engaging situation and some of us personally have experienced threatening action which has required us to have security or police escorts. Not at all pleasant when we are there in an animal welfare role.

However, on the positive side, the New Zealand Government publication “Welfare Pulse” which covers animal welfare in New Zealand and around the world now regularly includes articles from research institutions concerning the work they are undertaking and there have been publication releases by the media in regard to approval given by the Government for genetic modifications to take place in regard to goats, sheep and cattle and also for the reintroduction of xenotransplantation, e.g, the introduction of stem cells from pigs into humans to assist diabetics in the production of insulin. The understanding of these fields of research may be particularly challenging to a lay person.

The Royal New Zealand SPCA has an Animals In Science Advisory Committee which keeps in touch with its nominees throughout New Zealand – sometimes asking that a questionnaire be completed which can give an overall view of the situations and perhaps frustrations being experienced by them, and offering assistance if required. On other occasions it may contact the AEC chairpersons to enquire about

attendance and contributions from our nominees and to ask that they support their attendances at up-skilling opportunities which may occur e.g, the NAEAC workshop which is usually held in Wellington, and also advising them of relevant events and speakers which may be in their locality.

Being an animal welfarist the feeling of total satisfaction in what you are doing is hard to achieve. But, we are not on an AEC to give a scientist’s perspective – we are there to fulfill our role with our particular skills and to ask the questions that are representative of that role, but not limited just to our field. Sometimes we can find decisions very difficult but the decision on whether an experiment shall be approved or not is hopefully made by the committee as a whole – preferably by consensus. Some institutions have reference to the consensus ruling within their Code of Ethical Conduct (CEC) and I, for one, would encourage that it be implemented in all institutions’ CECs if it is not already included.

As an animal welfarist, I would prefer that animals were not subjected to manipulation. But as this is within the law we must ensure that New Zealand keeps up with the outside world in its endeavours to discover and apply alternative methods which do not involve animals, to ensure new and improved systems and procedures which are adopted overseas are applied in this country and to continue to contribute to give these creatures the best quality of life possible.

The AECs I believe are working as a team with a common goal to achieve the best scientific results with the best possible animal welfare – or perhaps I should put it the other way around – to achieve the best animal welfare and thus the best scientific outcomes.

It can be frustrating, it might not be personally fulfilling, but the role we play is necessary given the opportunity. The animals we deal with are special in our eyes because of the sacrifice they make and they require special considerations by us all.