

Serving on an Animal Ethics Committee – a hospital pass or a valued distinction?

Dr Geoff Dandie

CEO, ANZCCART
Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

We all like to feel valued. We all want to feel like our efforts and hard work are both worthwhile and appreciated. It is nothing more than basic human nature and the need we all have, to be important to someone or something at some level. Whether it is in our daily role as a parent, or a friend, employee, or member of an Animal Ethics Committee (AEC), we all need to feel that we are valued. At the same time, we all tend to stop occasionally and wonder if our efforts are appreciated and this is even true of 'volunteers' who are often espoused as being the heart and soul of Australian and New Zealand societies and the lifestyle that we enjoy in this part of the world.

The question is, does this service come at a cost – either personal or professional; and if it does, are those costs outweighed by the more positive aspects that are associated with AEC membership?

Clearly, membership of an AEC carries a significant workload and it is probably reasonable to suggest that most people do not realise how much work is involved until they become part of the system. We naturally tend to focus on the meetings themselves when determining if we have time to serve on an AEC and only realise that the majority of the workload falls outside the meeting room when the agenda papers arrive each month. But even then, do we ever stop and consider how the time we are devoting to one or more AECs is affecting those around us?

Life's pressures and our increasingly busy lifestyle mean that the demands on our time are many and

varied. So clearly, service through membership of an AEC is not for everyone. However, for those with the interest and time to devote to an AEC, they will almost always find the experience a rich and rewarding one that in some cases may become almost addictive.

Introduction

When I was asked to ponder on this topic and attempt to offer an answer to the question "Is serving on an AEC a valued distinction or a bit of a hospital pass?" my instantaneous response was that the answer to this question had to be a clear and simple "Yes!". After taking a bit more time and thinking about the question in a lot more detail, I felt that my first response might have been a little too simplistic and it really should have been something clearer and more expansive, like... "Yes, both a hospital pass and a valued distinction!"

Looking more carefully at the question in the context of AEC membership does however mean that we must also consider it from the perspective of different member categories and different members. This is particularly important here because of the diverse membership of an AEC so it is probably reasonable to assume that there are as many answers to this question as there are members of AECs; after all, every member of every committee is an individual with his/her own life circumstances. This will mean that every member will also experience his or her own conflicts, challenges and difficulties from time to time when work on behalf of the AEC impinges on the rest of their life. We must also be cognisant of the fact that this kind of effect is not the exclusive domain of any particular category of AEC member, so while institutions tend to be more conscious of the special need of the external members, the stresses

and conflicts that might result from the additional workload of AEC membership can, for example, potentially effect institutional research staff on the AEC as much as anyone.

One of the most basic aspects of the human psyche is the inherent need to be appreciated. Whether it is for our artistic abilities, our physical and sporting prowess, our intellectual capacity or for the services we provide to others, we all want to be valued or appreciated by someone for our efforts. It is a fairly simple, yet important form of reward for the effort and hard work that has been put into any endeavour. Whether it is part of our daily role as a parent, a friend, employee, or member of an AEC, we all need to feel that we are needed and valued. We want to know that our contributions are worthwhile and appreciated. Being human, we may on occasions also pause to consider if our efforts are as appreciated as they should be – and this is true of most ‘volunteers’ who are so often publicly espoused as being the heart and soul of the Australian and New Zealand communities and the lifestyle that we enjoy in this part of the world.

Within the confines of a contribution like this, I would suggest that it is pretty clear that the efforts of AEC members of all categories are truly valued. Speaking on behalf of ANZCCART, I can state with absolute certainty that as an organisation, we are in awe of the time and effort all members put into AECs and the whole AEC / animal welfare system. We are among the first to acknowledge that without AEC members, the whole system that we rely so heavily on to effectively regulate and monitor the necessary use of animals in research and teaching would grind to a halt. It was for these reasons that the Board of ANZCCART decided to recognise the extraordinary work done by AEC members by selecting one outstanding AEC member each year for recognition with our AEC Member of the Year Award. While the fact that we are only able to recognise one person each year means that this is a little tokenistic, the fact that it leads AECs and/or institutions across Australia and New Zealand to pause and make the effort to acknowledge the efforts made by their AEC members and go through the nomination process is not to be underestimated and is something that is appreciated by the nominees. This of course helps to support my contention that the efforts of AEC members are truly

valued by the institutions, Government regulatory officials, research administrators and others who take the time to write and submit these nominations. However, we would be a little naive if we thought that the efforts of all our vital AEC members are equally appreciated all the time, by everyone. Perhaps we only need look at the protesters that occasionally target ANZCCART conferences to remind ourselves of this and the fact that some find the whole AEC process impossible to endorse.

Away from the AEC meeting table and back in our own real worlds, those we care about will generally understand and accept how important the task we have taken on as a member of an AEC really is. They may even have some concept of the vital role every AEC member has in determining what scientific or medical research will be done and how and by whom, but will they really care when it impacts on their own life and plans.

I suspect that most people don't really have a clear idea of how much work is involved with membership of an AEC until they have actually served on it for a few months at least. It is very simple to say that the agenda papers can be quite long, but it is only after you have received a few sets that you truly appreciate that they can range in length from the equivalent of a short novel right through to a tome the size of *War and Peace* (Tolstoy 1869) and while most AEC Executive Officers are very good at getting the agenda papers out to members a week or more before the meeting, it is still a lot of reading in a limited timeframe. The other thing to bear in mind is that these papers not only have to be read, but also analysed in significant detail. It is not like reading a novel or the newspaper where you just absorb information. These papers have to be interrogated and analysed while they are being read, so that you can be sure to check that the applicant has adequately addressed all your concerns before you go to the meeting and discuss the merits and demerits of the proposal in detail. This is going to mean setting aside at least a few hours each evening (if you have work or other commitments during the day), or time each day (if you have that luxury) so that you can prepare. This is obviously going to mean time away from your normal routine and time away from the normal duties and people that rely on you as well.

Time and serving on an AEC

So, let us just take a moment to think about how this kind of workload might potentially affect an average AEC member in each of the standard categories. There will always be one common factor... Time!

To illustrate how this may actually affect individual AEC members, I will take you through a series of very hypothetical situations that will hopefully illustrate how the time commitment and pressures involved with AEC membership could possibly play out by considering the following members of a university AEC.

As the proprietor of a busy suburban veterinary practice, our example Category A member really can't afford to close the door while he heads off to attend the monthly AEC meeting. So a locum needs to be engaged to keep the practice running in his/her absence – for which the practice may or may not be fully compensated by the University. Hopefully, this should mean that all will go well for the practice and its employees while the boss is away. Or will it? Practice staff are always flat out covering for the boss when Jane is off at AEC meetings and clients bank up in the waiting room because the locum does not know his/her way around the practice as well as the boss and takes nearly twice as long to see each patient. This puts an additional burden on the reception staff who have to work twice as hard, placating waiting clients and generally keeping the peace. Progressively, Jane finds that staff absenteeism starts to increase on the third Tuesday of each month (AEC meeting day) and increasingly starts to wonder if this role on the AEC is really worth all the hassle (as well as the work required to prepare for the AEC meetings) and stress to the practice staff as well.

Good veterinarians don't just enter the profession to run a small business; they become veterinarians because they love and care for animals. So the work of a veterinarian on any AEC is just an extension of that caring role that helps to look after animal welfare. Of course, it does also come with other professional benefits like being forced to remain current in best practice techniques – particularly in the really important areas like anaesthesia and analgesia. It also helps to build greater professional relationships and networks with other experts that you may need to call on from time to time. So, even though it does take Jane out of her business, she is gaining both personal

and professional satisfaction from her role as well as other tangible benefits from her role on the AEC.

As the experienced scientist on the Committee, you find yourself having to dash out of the laboratory and leave your Research Assistant and PhD students in charge of the project work, while you head off to the Research Office meeting room for the monthly AEC meeting. At one level, the people you have left in the laboratory are happy that they will soon be able to start the planned experiments as soon as you approve them (because they mistakenly believe that you will (a) be part of the decision-making process and (b) be able to ensure an easy passage for your projects), but at another level, they are seriously ticked off with you because you have left them to finish your work while they have their own tasks to do as well. At the same time, your Head of Department is stomping up and down the corridor demanding to know where you are because he needs someone to review the manuscript that was sent to him a month ago and must be done this afternoon while he attends the Academic Senate meeting.

Of course, every researcher will instantly understand that 'Murphy's Law' (anything that can go wrong, will go wrong... and at the worst possible moment) is always going to play a significant role in his/her ever constant need to meet deadlines. So, AEC meetings and grant application writing deadlines are always going to be a deadly combination. The simple fact of life for many Australian researchers is that grant writing time and submission deadlines correlate almost perfectly with the AEC meetings that have the biggest set of papers to read and the longest meetings. Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council grant application process for example, focuses on submission in late February / early March, so this means that the process of grant writing will correlate perfectly with the first few meetings each year when there are always a lot of new applications to consider. Some of these applications will be tied to teaching programmes that are time-critical, while others may even be tied to grant applications themselves. There is also always a flood of annual reports and applications for annual renewal of AEC permits that have to be considered as well, so these will usually be the meetings when you can be sure that the agenda papers will arrive in volumes that resemble an encyclopaedia. This may mean that, by necessity, you need to rely more heavily than you would like to on other members of your

laboratory and your collaborators to work on your own grant application – just so you can be sure that it continues to progress in line with the impending fixed deadlines.

How impressed are your colleagues by your devotion to your AEC duties now and what effect will this have on your application for tenure – particularly if your grant application is not funded?

There are, however, two sides to every coin and while serving on an AEC may carry the greatest professional costs to researchers, it may also come with the greatest professional benefits. There is no doubt that the art of writing a good AEC application (or grant application) is a learned skill that comes with real benefits. The ability to write a clear and concise application that “ticks all the right boxes” is the best way to fast-track the approval of your project and there is no better way to learn that skill than by example. So while standard AEC practices ensure that there can be no favouritism in the system, it is often the case that applications coming from AEC members (past or present) are more commonly approved at their first presentation – simply because they are better applications.

The animal welfare advocate on the Committee is always going to hold the welfare of animals in the highest regard. Regrettably, as these members are also the most difficult members to replace on any AEC, it is also true that they are more likely than other members to serve on multiple committees. This means that the normal difficulties associated with the time commitment required to serve may well be multiplied two- or three-fold, or potentially more, depending on the number of committees on which you serve. I recall for example, that our inaugural AEC member of the year, sat on no fewer than eight AECs.

It may also be that you are a senior member of your welfare organisation and this also includes meeting with potential benefactors occasionally so you can explain how important the work of your group really is in the animal welfare sphere. The CEO of your organisation rings you up at 8.30 on Tuesday morning to implore you to drop everything and come into the office at 10.30 for a meeting with a potential donor with VERY deep pockets. Normally you would be prepared to do this for her, but you have an AEC meeting scheduled for this morning and you have already promised to be there as the other animal welfare advocate member is in hospital getting his hernia fixed. When you explain this and the potential

ramifications your absence would have on the research work of the institute, your CEO is quick to point out that a stated aim of your organisation is to oppose the use of animals in research and none of the other senior people in the organisation are available to meet with this benefactor except for Barry who, at his very best, would scare off a concrete statue.

Are the members of your animal welfare organisation still going to be supportive of your on-going involvement with the AEC after they find out that it may potentially have cost the organisation hundreds of thousands of dollars? How will you feel?

May I suggest that you will (or at least should) feel pretty good about yourself and what you have achieved, because your participation in that AEC meeting has helped to ensure that the welfare of all the animals being used in the projects considered at the meeting has been given due consideration and will be looked after. So, instead of going to a meeting that may at some time in the future, potentially benefit the welfare of animals, what you have done WILL benefit a number of animals. It is also worth remembering that the welfare of animals in the laboratory is just as important (if not more so) than the welfare of any other animal. So your work today should never be considered of secondary importance.

While you, as a valued Lay member of an AEC, might be planning to head off to the scheduled meeting tomorrow, your daughter implores you to look after one of her children who is off sick from school while she goes off to an interview for her dream job. Will your daughter (or son-in-law, who must now take a day off work tomorrow and lose a day's pay) be so appreciative of your role on that AEC and your dedication to it? You have already put an enormous amount of work into preparation for this meeting. Even though it is clear that all the applicants have really tried very hard to write their applications in clear and plain language, you have still had to work out what a few of them were looking at and how they were planning on carrying out their experiments. After spending all those hours reading the applications and checking out what the confusing bits meant by googling them, you would really feel cheated if you were not able to put all that effort into effect. There is also the issue of your conscience as well. As a visitor to the University, you feel obliged to turn up for every meeting that you can and the idea of dropping out at the last minute when it might mean

that the meeting may not be quorate, fills you with a deep sense of guilt.

The value of a volunteer in any role is a little subjective. If as a volunteer you have provided a cup of tea and a sandwich to a hospital patient or an emergency worker in a disaster zone, it will be greatly appreciated by the recipient, but you will not have changed the course of history. Yet strangely, your participation in an AEC meeting may be less appreciated by those around you even though it could possibly prove to be a huge contribution to society. If just one of the projects you help to review during your time on an AEC results in a new treatment for heart disease or cancer or helps to prevent the extinction of an endangered species, then you as a “lay person” have played a significant role in bringing that benefit to the world as an integral part of the team. So how can the value of your volunteer efforts be measured, when that value is immeasurable?

Obviously the Animal House manager has to attend every AEC meeting and every time you go to the AEC meeting you have to get your senior technician to step up and handle the enquiries, deliveries and phone calls etc while you are out of the office. While she smiles obligingly as you “put her in charge” and walk out the door with your agenda papers filling the bag you carry, you have heard the other staff members talk about how she complains bitterly about you “swanning off for a cup of tea and a chat with your mates yet again while she has to do your job as well as her own”. She has also been heard to regularly say that she had better jolly well get some over-time to make up for it, even though she bullies the other staff into doing her work for her – otherwise the animal care standards will fall short of what is required for you all to keep your jobs.

Can staff morale and/or your budget cope with the role you play on the AEC?

Perhaps more important questions to ask might be: How would your budget and your staff morale cope if all the projects considered at the meeting were passed without your input? What would happen if the AEC-approved projects were beyond the capacity of your staff or facilities? Would all those animals receive the best possible care and attention during the course of each project without the committee being able to draw on your expertise and advice?

The Category E members of our AECs are employed by their institutions because they care about

as well as care for the animals in their facilities, so including them in both the review process as well as being part of the research team is an important aspect that helps to ensure that they can not only care for the animals, but do it in a way that will not compromise any aspect of the study. That way, it is a win for the animals, the researchers and the rest of the animal care team as well.

As the Chair of any committee, you will need to have a pretty common set of skills. You will need a good working knowledge of the committee’s terms of reference (and in this case, the Code and legislation as well). You will need to have some personnel skills that will help you to draw out opinions from each member of the committee, and some excellent negotiating skills that will help mediate the discussion so it doesn’t get too heated or dominated by one or two individuals. Perhaps most important of all, you will need good time management skills because it is always easy to allow discussions (or arguments) to go on too long after they cease to become productive – and recognising that point can be a real talent!

As Chair of an AEC, these skills are even more critical than most other roles as the whole concept of chairing a committee that must make decisions based on consensus rather than a majority vote introduces a whole new dynamic into your role. While the AEC Chair does not necessarily participate in the decision-making process, he/she must be fully familiar with the issues that will be discussed and ideally should be at least as familiar as the members themselves with the applications to be considered and the potential issues that may come up during the committee’s deliberations. Without this level of preparedness, the AEC Chair is not going to be able to ensure that each application is given appropriate consideration or to properly manage the meeting in terms of time and committee resources.

Of course, the biggest challenge and most unusual aspect of chairing an AEC is the fact that you essentially find yourself being on call 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. What many new Chairs don’t realise is that if anything goes seriously wrong with any projects under the purview of the committee, the AEC Chair will generally be one of the first people to be called in to consult and potentially intercede in the course of the project and act on behalf of the animals and the AEC. When you get your first call out during a most enjoyable dinner party with friends

one Saturday night after a few glasses of excellent red wine, you naturally start to ask yourself if it really was such a great idea to take on this role.

It is not all doom and gloom though. From a professional perspective, your role as Chair of a committee that has to be constituted according to National Guidelines and is empowered to make decisions that cannot be ignored, does bring you (as Chair) to the attention of the most senior members of the Institution's staff – if for no other reason that it is to them that you must report. So not only do you gain an opportunity to hone your chairing skills to the highest level, you also get to demonstrate those skills – again at the highest level.

The Executive Officer, like the Chair, agreed to take on the role with the AEC when it was offered to you because it seemed like a good career move and might help make you a bit more likely to be offered a continuing position. It also seemed to be “just another committee” and the role of Secretary/ Executive Officer to the AEC would be pretty much the same as the Finance Committee position that you just missed out on to someone with a bit more seniority. Little did you realise at the time that you would be responsible for putting together a sheaf of agenda papers each month that made the final Harry Potter novel (Rowlings 2007) look like a comic book. Nobody told you that there would be the unrealistic expectation that you would be able to type up the minutes, get the Chair to check and approve them, and then get notifications out to all applicants within 24 hours of the meeting. Nor did you realise that you would have to cope with phone calls from impatient researchers when they don't receive notification about the outcome of their application within hours of the end of the meeting. It never even occurred to you at the time, that you would also become the primary contact for every problem, query, adverse event, etc. that happens to take place at any hour of the day or night. You had figured on having to chase up a few people here and there to get information for the committee, but your mindset did not include having to write a hundred begging emails every year to encourage all the applicants to the committee to put in their annual report – just so you can have a whole lot more work to do collating all the data for submission to Government. About now, you really wish that you had been appointed to the Finance Committee instead!

In spite of all this, I have yet to meet an AEC Executive Officer that does not love his or her job and excel at it. One might sceptically suggest that this merely reflects the fact that those who don't, won't last in the role. While that may be true, if you speak with the people who do fill this important position one of the first things you will learn is that they sense that value of their role and they never get a chance to be bored with it because there is always something different going on.

One common denominator in all these scenarios is time. Serving on an AEC takes up a lot of time and these days that increasingly means that it is time you are not spending on your normal life's activities. In the case of AEC membership, the time factor includes or perhaps focuses on the preparation time required as much, if not more so, than the time out required to attend meetings. The fact that this commitment can affect family, friends and colleagues alike is also something that we need to bear in mind.

So, all this leads me to ask the question... “Why on earth do we do it?”

Conclusions

I think that there are probably two main answers to this question that I would like to put forward. The first is “Because we believe in the job and in the system and understand that someone has to do it”. The second serious home truth would be “This is not a job for everyone, it is only one for the committed (or possibly those who should be) and those with the required time and dedication to do the job”.

So if we come back to our original question... Serving on an AEC – a hospital pass or a valued distinction? The answer really is, YES. Some people will look at an appointment to an AEC as something akin to a hospital pass or a death sentence for their social life and find it all too difficult to manage. Other people will regard such an appointment as a valued distinction, and I would suggest that these are the people we want and need to serve on these committees.

References

- Rowlings, J. K. 2007: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Tolstoy, Leo 1869: War and Peace. Published as an eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org.