

Euthanasia in the workplace – impacts on staff

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People who kill animals, albeit humanely, as part of their job, are at risk of experiencing euthanasia-related stress that is not typical of other workplaces. They have reported experiencing feelings of guilt, grief and depression, and physical ailments such as high blood pressure amongst a wide range of negative responses to euthanasia (Reeve et al. 2005). Also, they sometimes feel stigmatised and unappreciated for the work that they do which is unpleasant (Stafford et al. 2001; Baran et al. 2009).

Late in 2008, Massey University became aware of concerns about the impact that euthanasia of animals for research and teaching was having on staff. The College of Sciences, in March 2009 commissioned a review of the impacts of animal euthanasia and slaughter on the wellbeing of the Massey University staff involved.

Specifically the review sought to facilitate the alleviation of identifiable negative impacts on staff wellbeing as a result of euthanasia or slaughter exposure and to improve the workplace environment and job satisfaction of staff engaged in these activities.

Data were gathered by an anonymous and voluntary survey of staff who had been involved with euthanasia. It attempted to assess the nature and magnitude of perceived negative impacts of euthanasia events on the staff involved, and also sought volunteers to participate in interviews or focus groups to discuss

these matters further. These face-to-face meetings solicited the views of staff who are actively involved in euthanasia on matters including the impact of their participation in euthanasia and what the University could do to more effectively manage euthanasia-related workplace stress.

Recommendations for changes to Massey University policy and practice were provided to the College of Sciences. Many of these have now been implemented.

Survey and interviews/focus groups

People identified on animal ethics protocols as being involved in animal euthanasia between 2007 and 2009 were invited by individual letter to a) participate in an anonymous survey, and b) participate in interviews and focus group discussions on the impacts that euthanasia and slaughter house visits had on them. The number of people sent letters was approximately one-third of the total staff complement of the Institutes involved in animals based research. A proportion (24%) of these people could not be contacted or were not directly involved in euthanasia. Of the 104 people who were directly involved, 52 sent back completed surveys and 28 indicated a willingness to be involved in interviews and/or focus group discussions. Fourteen people indicated specifically that they did not want to participate in interviews.

Staff were asked in the survey to rank between 1 (low) and 5 (high) their stress responses to five aspects of euthanasia: (1) euthanasia *per se*; (2) animal restraint; (3) knowledge of the purpose of euthanasia; (4) sensory impact; and (5) dismemberment (Table 1). Some respondents refused to rank the purposes for euthanasia, commenting that if they did not know

Table 1 Scores of each aspect of euthanasia were summed for each respondent. This gave a range of 4/25 to 20/25 and a mean of 9.57, median 9 (N = 50).

	4-8*	10-14	16-20
Percentage of respondents	52	32	14

* A score of 1 in any category represents no or little stress.

why it was being done, they would not participate in the euthanasia event. For these people, this was an all-or-nothing condition of participation and, on average, this was the most critical factor leading to stress among staff involved in euthanasia.

A major finding from the survey is that there are clearly some staff for whom euthanasia presents minimal stress while for a smaller number of staff it is a significant challenge.

Although collection of slaughterhouse material exposes staff to visual, auditory and olfactory stimuli, staff consistently rank this as a low-stress activity. Dismemberment of cadavers, whatever their source, was ranked lowest in the reported stress levels.

Each staff member was asked to complete the diagram (narrative chart, see Figure 1) indicating changes, if any, in their level of acceptance of euthanasia, in an attempt to graphically represent how well they cope with euthanasia. The technique followed that of a retrospective narrative chart using a time line from their first day at Massey University

until the day of the meeting (Reeve et al. 2004). Once explained, participants readily understood what was being asked of them. Each participant was asked to write down significant turning point events, if any, when the trajectory of the narrative chart changed and to briefly talk about the changes. Emotionally charged events such as a lethal injection that transfixes the vein and results in distress to the animal without rapid anaesthesia are usually recalled with particular clarity.

Most participants perceived that their acceptance of euthanasia at Massey University had improved (48%) or remained the same (30%) with time. While 13% had a variable narrative picture, only two (9%) of the 23 interviewed indicated that they were now less accepting than they were when they started at the University.

Recommendations

Recommendations on the development and implementation of policy relevant to animal euthanasia were presented to the College of Sciences. They were aimed at establishing, at Massey University as a good employer, and in consultation with staff, practices to mitigate the identified negative impacts of animal euthanasia on affected staff. Underpinning these recommendations is the principle of facilitated self-regulation. The institution and its operational units, the people involved in protocols involving euthanasia

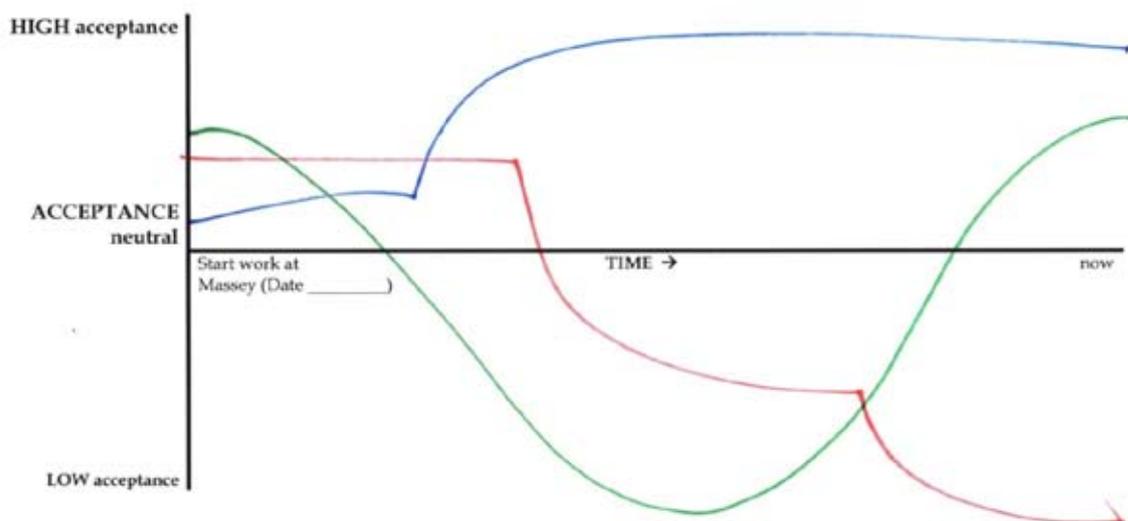


Fig. 1 Examples of narrative picture of the level of acceptance of euthanasia during the course of employment at Massey University.

especially the chief applicants, and the staff who are line managers have responsibilities for those directly involved in euthanasia.

There was a wealth of suggestions from participants in the surveys and interviews about how the working environment can be improved for staff involved with euthanasia. They included changes to: (a) the institutional culture including responsibility for the impacts on staff; and (b) approaches regarding the euthanasia tasks and skills required.

Institutional culture including responsibility for impacts on staff

Massey University as an institution has taken significant steps to assist staff to manage this workplace stress. The University now requires that chief applicants on animal ethics protocols approved by Massey University Animal Ethics Committee must accept full responsibility for the safe, humane and efficient euthanasia of animals. Chief applicants must ensure that all staff involved are fully informed about the purposes, are properly trained and competent, and that procedures are carried out correctly. They must be aware of the potential impacts on the wellbeing of staff involved and be sensitive and responsive to these. Chief applicants must also be aware of the resources available at departmental, institute and University levels to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities.

Line managers of staff are responsible for identifying those staff who show high stress responses to euthanasia and for taking appropriate actions for ongoing assessment and risk management, i.e. assessment of euthanasia stress in staff as part of their normal day-to-day interactions with staff and formally during the performance, review and planning process that all staff undergo.

Support options currently include changes to the staff health and safety web pages with a separate section on supporting staff involved with animal euthanasia. Staff can seek professional assistance via the Employee Assistance Programme. Line managers may use Sick and Discretionary Leave regulations to ensure that affected employees take time off or time

out from these duties when showing signs of strain as a result of euthanasia.

Approaches to the euthanasia tasks and skills required

A training course will be established for staff before they are involved in any euthanasia. Successful completion should result in that person becoming competent in a particular technique, e.g., cervical dislocation of chickens. The training will have a major component devoted to assisting people to develop their self-care capabilities and to make them aware of the support available to them.

Acknowledgments

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