

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

Dr Mark Oliver

Ngapouri Research Farm Laboratory
Liggins Institute, The University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand

The hospital pass is a well-known phrase used to describe a thoughtless or perhaps even malicious pass of the rugby ball to a team-mate in a hopeless position who cannot avoid being smashed in a subsequent tackle. The term does not really apply in rugby league as everyone gets smashed in every tackle made on them. “Set up” is another phrase that may suit or perhaps being made to “walk the plank”. For some reason I used the phrase hospital pass at a planning meeting for the ANZCCART conference and you guessed it – took the pass myself and attempted to explain what I meant by using it at the meeting. This paper is the perspective of a science representative academic. To some, service on an Animal Ethics Committee (AEC) may appear to be a hospital pass but for others, myself included, there are some very positive and rewarding aspects. At the core of how service on an AEC may lead an academic to feel they got a hospital pass is how they were recruited; did they respond willingly and enlist or were they press-ganged or conscripted? It may even be possible that some science representative somewhere sought a position on an AEC without even being asked. Asking for a show of hands for this option at the ANZCCART meeting yielded a big fat zero. My first service on the committee was quite voluntary, but I was asked. I am sure pressure would have been applied if I had not been compliant but I did have a number of genuine motivations for saying yes.

First, I had found in the early 1990s as a PhD student the whole concept of the AEC very mysterious and had little personal involvement in the development of the applications. Most of them were programmes developed with as broad a scope as possible by a very busy Head of Department. Sometimes it was hard to identify where your particular project fitted in to the programme and the only thing that seemed to matter was the panic every year when the numbers had to be submitted. The primary imperative appeared to be funding and grants, and that message was of paramount importance to the developing academic. Towards the end of my PhD when I had more opportunity to supervise and be more involved in the training of others, the usefulness of having an AEC-approved protocol became much more apparent to me. Suddenly standards of technical competence and performance became very important and as time and money were running out there was added motivation for making sure as few as possible animal studies were required. In addition to all of this, I was getting a little shell-shocked with dealing with all these caged and highly instrumented sheep I was studying. They were long experiments and I very soon discovered that I did perceive differences in personalities between the animals and became very attuned to their welfare, well at least as I perceived it.

When I had my PhD *viva*, low and behold the external examiner asked me what ethical consideration had I given to the execution of my sheep experiments? I was stumped at first but eventually made the statement that cost-benefit analysis had been needed to justify the experiment, the number of animals used and severity of the manipulations. Really that was my first formal test of my ethical standards as an

investigator. Here you are at your exam expecting a walloping difficult question on the intricacies of fetal-maternal physiology and get a question on ethics; hey man, nice shot. The interesting thing is when you have an experience like that you sometimes revisit it when asking other people why they are doing a particular piece of research and not because it is part of your function as an AEC member.

I had done my PhD training at a medical school but went on to do a post doctoral fellowship at an applied agricultural research institution. Ethics very quickly became a focus for me as my senior scientist appeared to be at war with the Animal Welfare Officer and AEC. He had come from a UK background where he had “got his ticket” to do particular procedures and had the view that what he actually wanted to experiment on was nobody’s business. Whether this impression he had created about the UK system was right or wrong, I did not bother trying to find out, this was New Zealand and the local AEC was not pleased with him. Over time we had a few misdemeanour events where we had departed from agreed protocol and the Animal Welfare Officer quickly realised the best way to deal with it was to make me the meat in the sandwich. To be fair though he was very reasonable and I found the discussions very stimulating and thought-provoking. I quickly took over the ethics responsibilities for our projects and benefited from some very good veterinary and welfare perspectives from the Animal Welfare Officer.

Moving back to research at the University of Auckland in 1995 I took up a role that involved research, laboratory coordination and preparing ethics applications and returns. About this time animal ethics was starting to become a lot more of a concern for the University. Five years later I began my first term on the AEC. I was asked to perform this role because my experience with large animals was required and I was seen as fair and objective. It was also suggested to me that it would support my academic career as part of University Service. I was interested in finding out what was going on research-wise at the University so agreed to be on the Committee. I had no idea of the amount of work involved or of the standard of application that was regularly being presented to the AEC; both were a great shock. I was given some advice by senior AEC members to spend at least 2 hours on any application assigned to me and perhaps

another half day on the remainder. At this stage there was no requirement for post-approval monitoring or laboratory visits, etc. Nevertheless I was swamped and appalled at the standard of some applications and also the amount of competition, duplication and lack of communication going on between the various departments and faculties. To the credit of the two chairs I served under during that term they did a lot of work to get groups communicating and collaborating in the spirit of good Three Rs practice and let’s face it, good economics.

After that initial 3-year term, I had a few years off for good behaviour and went away to develop Ngapouri Research Farm. Even though I was not an AEC member I was regularly consulted about sheep issues by the University Animal Welfare Officer and was quite happy to help. Setting up a remote facility actually required a lot of thought and responsibility from animal ethics, health and welfare perspectives, to leading the development of a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and various programmes of research programme applications. By 2008 I was worried about my academic career and desperately wanted a manager to take over many of my duties at the farm laboratory (apart from ethics and medicines). I was conned back onto the committee by senior academics with the promise that I would have some managerial support. The manager duly arrived 2.5 years into my AEC term. Given the difficulties with being off-site and the lack of resources offered to me to deal with this problem I think I had the rough end of the stick this time. The standard of applications had improved since my last service on the AEC but the workload had increased again with post-approval monitoring, laboratory visits and the development of University-wide SOPs for the various facilities. By the time I got off the AEC I was very time-stressed and struggling to fulfil my role. I also really was questioning the value the University placed on AEC service given the amount of time and effort required.

So, in summary the evidence that I had received a hospital pass was first that nobody really helped me deal with the workload requirements of AEC service. There was questionable value for developing an academic CV given the workload involved. The quality of too many applications, poor lay summaries, tedious cut and pastes from grants and the thoughtless signoff by investigators and their Heads

of Departments made me wonder how valued AECs really were to the institution. Another perception was that an AEC member could provide a “back door” to help get difficult applications through or mentor hopeless case principal investigators that really needed more effective and direct encouragement to perform more thoughtfully. There is a lot that can be done by institutions to make AEC membership by scientific representatives more rewarding.

On the other side of the ledger, there were moments when I got an application that was written concisely, thoughtfully and fit for purpose: very much a “do unto others as you would have done to you” type of application. Some of these people had not even served on AECs but were collegial and smart enough to realise that this was the correct and professional way to operate. Because there were not a lot of mistakes or excessive chaff, I was in a better mood to assist the investigator to maximise the value and ethical standard of their project. Other benefits included the satisfaction of providing specialist knowledge and receiving positive feedback for this effort from investigators and other people associated with the AEC/facility management. Service on an AEC is very broadening in terms of gaining an understanding of the amazing variety of research going on at some institutions and there are generic skills that can be picked up in reading about other investigators’

research endeavours. Other skills honed during AEC service are effective problem-solving, negotiation, communication and networking. A big positive is the people you meet on the AEC, during post-approval reviews and at meetings like ANZCCART. Not just other scientists but all the people required to make the animal ethics process functional and rigorous.

In conclusion, there are some good ways that both the institution and individual can make prospective science representatives on AECs feel like they not getting a hospital pass or walking the plank. The institutions need to recognise the time and effort AEC members need to expend and increase the academic reward to the individual for service. I also believe that institutions and departments should buy into making sure there is effective rotation and exposure of less experienced scientists on AECs while balancing that with mentorship and experience from more senior academics. The individual must negotiate service on an AEC very carefully with their academic superiors and Heads of Departments; make sure you are in a position where a hospital pass is very unlikely and the reward is sufficient. Make service on an AEC a worthwhile experience by maximising the positive aspects of the experience, sure it is hard work but the knowledge gained and interactions with the people involved are very valuable.