

The response reproduced below was submitted to the consultation held by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics on the ethics of research involving animals during October-December 2003. The views expressed are solely those of the respondent(s) and not those of the Council.

This response was submitted using the online facility:

Anonymous #15

QUESTIONS ANSWERED:

1. Background: the use of animals in research

ANSWER:

The use of animals in biomedical research is essential to the continued progress in human and veterinary medicine. It is appropriate that it is kept to the minimum by using alternatives where possible, but it is unlikely to be replaced by such alternatives in the near future. For example, information on the effect of compound X on blood pressure cannot be fully determined in anything other than an in-vivo system because of the reflexes involved in the control of blood pressure. Information from animal experiments can be used as a guide to what can happen in Man, but it is not a fool-proof predictor. I am happy to justify such studies to further our understanding of physiology/biochemistry, and help alleviate all forms of disease. However, use for cosmetic reasons (rightly banned) and testing of e.g. household chemicals is at best dubious. Suffering should be (and is) minimised; it is difficult to quantify suffering, so it is difficult to specify an upper limit on it irrespective of the benefits.

2. Genetically modified animals

ANSWER:

The principles in GM animals are not different to those for 'normal' animals. They are no more unnatural than the millions of humans with genetic mutations (e.g. familial hypercholesterolaemics with non-functioning LDL receptors). I am happy to countenance the creation of any GM animal in the pursuit of understanding physiology etc, and the creation of new medicines. The cost-benefit ratio must be determined for all animal studies (GM or other). The creation of animals with neurodegenerative diseases may be justified on the benefit to the treatment of a hideous human condition

3. Alternatives

ANSWER:

Research into alternative is (rightly) a very active field. I'm not sure about 'more'; 'continued' would be a better word. The drive for such alternatives is as much about cost for industry and academia as animal studies per se are expensive. They should continue to bear the brunt of the costs. There is almost certainly significant duplication of some animal research. With the huge financial value associated with medicines, it is unfeasible to expect wholesale exchange of information to eliminate this duplication. Likewise in academia, careers, research grants etc are dependent on the generation of original data, making sharing of specifics difficult. More could be done to encourage generic data to be shared. I think scientific journals should be less 'coy' about their reporting of animal experiments. Alternatives have 'potential', but in many cases no more than that. As soon as they have been thoroughly validated, they will be adopted as they are quicker and cheaper.

4. Ethical issues

ANSWER:

I do not think non-human animals have a 'moral' status per se, but should be accorded rights which limit their suffering by whatever means. There is a spectrum from non-human primates through to amoebae and the protection afforded them should reflect this. The difference between humans and other animals which allows us to experiment and cause 'suffering' is worthy of a PhD! However, I am happy to be classified as a 'speciesist'. If I were to return to my house to find it on fire and had the time to rescue either my daughter or my cat, I would choose the former. I wouldn't try to justify it, it would be the obvious and right thing to do. Many of these concepts (unhappiness etc) are appropriate to other animals, but as above, there is a spectrum. I doubt that fruit flies get unhappy, but believe that monkeys do. Ditto with pain. There are standard methods for quantifying pain (physical and to some extent emotional) in animals that must be used in animal experiments. Suffering is minimised lest it interferes with the results of the experiments, let alone for ethical reasons. I am not convinced about the utility of research to see how animals perceive the world. What would we do with this information once we had it? Suffering of animals must be justified on the benefit to Man and also to other animals. Their use for these other purposes is not fundamentally morally different; the underlying assumption in our subjugation of animals is our superiority. Their environmental wellbeing is important. In general, lab animals are kept in far better conditions than many pets and most farm animals. My personal beliefs lead me to buy free-range eggs etc.

5. The regulations

ANSWER:

In general, the current regulations for assessing welfare are about right, but are on the limits of tolerability. Welfare should be monitored at all time points, and the assessments for the range of laboratory animals that I have used are adequately captured in the current regulations. I believed that the licences were required for all animal breeding, period. I think this is appropriate. Cost-benefit must be determined prior to study, and reassessed in the light of results. I am happy for such deliberations to be made public, but am wary of increasing further the bureaucratic burden. If UK regulation were tightened further, it would lead to a movement of this research to countries where the controls are less severe, i.e. almost anywhere. This will lead to a cost to animals (moving to a less controlled regime) and a cost to the UK scientific community.

6: Providing information to the public

ANSWER:

There is a large amount of disinformation in the public domain. This is in part because many scientists are reticent to acknowledge their part in animal experiments due to obvious safety concerns, I have personal experience of animal experimentation, so do not need further info to judge it. I am afraid that the general nihilistic and anti-science feeling of the public means that they will not believe any statements from the scientific or medical communities (vis the MMR fiasco). I would very strongly support a label on all medicines to the effect that these have been tested on animals. A simple statement to that effect, with the same prominence given to health warnings on cigarettes etc would suffice.