

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 #20

QUESTIONS ANSWERED:

1. Background: the use of animals in research

ANSWER:

If it is accepted, as it should be, that prevention of human suffering is a moral obligation, then the use of animals is unavoidable. Research involving animals provides information that is not available by any other method, and the results from research using animals are frequently transferred to humans. The question of what level of suffering would be unacceptable, whatever the potential benefits of the research, is a red herring: animals in pain do not provide useful data.

2. Genetically modified animals

ANSWER:

All animals are in some way or another GM, and there should be no special treatment of, for example, knockout or transgenic mice under the law. It is not clear to me that an animal suffering from a long term degenerative disease is necessarily suffering unless there are the specific and well-recognised signs of suffering, in which case the suffering should be ameliorated.

3. Alternatives

ANSWER:

Researchers want their work to be relevant and will use the best models and systems: academic peer pressure is a very effective tool for ensuring this is so. Many of the suggestions for alternatives are based on misunderstanding or wilful misreporting of the facts. Given that the majority of medical research is nowadays on long term degenerative diseases (atherosclerosis, cancer, arthritis, asthma, neurodegeneration), it is very difficult to see how any grossly simplified system (in vitro, in silico etc) can provide anything other than grossly simplified and misleading data.

4. Ethical issues

ANSWER:

Our ethical concerns should be geared to the animal's level of sentience. In the case of all mammals, this is high. For lower amphibians it is not and they function indistinguishably from robots. Having said that, my view is that any animal has fewer and less extensive rights than any human and their use in research is justified if the research is aimed at reducing human suffering.

5. The regulations

ANSWER:

The current system is unworkable. We frequently wait months - often more than 6 months - to receive verdicts on minor amendments to projects that have already been approved. When most scientists are on fixed-term contracts, often of only 1 or 2 years, these delays destroy jobs and careers and hamper research. Opinion polls suggest that the

vast majority of lay people are unconcerned about the use of small mammals in medical research, and therefore this whole area should be removed from the current legislative framework.

6: Providing information to the public

ANSWER:

The simplification required to communicate to all members of the public will distort the message to the point of incomprehensibility. Expert committees are a better way to police things. I think it is OK to label medicines that were developed using research with animals, as long as anyone that refuses such medication is not allowed to then use a disproportionate amount of NHS resources in an attempt to make them well. Let them eat herbs.