

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.

Anonymous #7

Question 4

I propose to comment on this first, as the underlying philosophy informs all the other issues.

However one looks at it, man is at the top of the evolutionary tree; is recognised by most other species as top predator; and has fashioned much of the world as we know it.

In the process, he has used many other animal species for food, drugs, clothing, power, transport, hunting and recreation.

Many species have been eliminated, deliberately or otherwise, during the development of human societies.

Many others have been domesticated, often by developing a special relationship and understanding with man; this generally works most effectively when man remains the "alpha male", especially with naturally "pack" species.

Animals clearly have no absolute moral status, any more than man does; it depends on the beliefs of society. After all, slavery was commonplace until recent years, and it still exists.

What may differ is the concept of right to individual life. Man is probably the only species that regards the life of an individual as important; for all others, only the survival of the species appears critical.

Higher animals do feel pain and fear as such, but the fear appears to be only short term; a prey herd that has just lost one of its members to a predator goes on calmly grazing in sight of the predator feeding.

Pain can be long lasting in higher animals; in the wild, if it is debilitating it will often lead to early death. We have no evidence that animals can predict, or fear, pain; but many species clearly recognise pain in others in their group, and often offer some form of support.

If self-awareness can be associated with rational thought, most higher animals do not have it; but many species do seem to be able to learn from experience, or from each other.

It is normally assumed that research involving animals is solely carried out to support the development of human health care; but a significant proportion of licensed research is directed to the veterinary care of domestic animals. And in this context it is easy to forget that an increasing amount of research using animals is directed towards investigation of wildlife, and of habitat management; this can include procedures such as netting and ringing birds, trapping small animals, fitting radio transmitters, moving eggs, and whole broods of young, to different locations. Many of these procedures would be classified as Moderate under the Animals Act; although some require an Environment Agency licence, many do not.

Question 1

It would theoretically be possible to obtain all the information that is yielded by animal experimentation by using human subjects instead; but our interpretation of medical ethics and the Helsinki Convention precludes most of this option.

There is, however, considerable scope for the use of human volunteers in routine quality and safety tests.

I cannot, at present, see any other alternative to using animals to obtain most of the data we need to develop effective therapies.

The species we use will depend on the nature of the investigation, and on the similarity of that aspect of the metabolism of that particular species to man.

The ban on the use of higher primates for most investigations is clearly defensible, on the grounds of their closeness to man; but what of the extensive behavioural studies with these species.

Many animals suffer pain, sometimes severe, during investigations; we do not know how much e.g. are rats and rabbits affected by what man would define as niggling discomfort.

The level of pain to which animals are exposed must depend on a view of the immediate benefit to be expected.

There is a suspicion that much "fundamental research", involving complex surgical procedures, is carried out merely to boost the publication list of the researcher.

The work on "smoking dogs" was indefensible; large numbers of dogs restrained, for long periods, in considerable discomfort, when the ill-effects of cigarette smoking had been clearly shown, and the remedy was obvious.

Question 2

GM animals can raise new and different issues. Although traditional breeding has produced cultivars that are in many cases effectively new species, they are normally viable and healthy; but not necessarily fertile.

Modern technology merely extends the breeder's power to make wider changes more rapidly, but often against an "unnatural" background. But this does not make the animals "unnatural".

Partly because "GM" has achieved notoriety so quickly, it can mean different things to different people; the different technologies tend to be considered separately, against different sets of criteria. The use of mutagens such as radiation and ENU; direct injection across wide trans-species gaps; cloning; even human IVF are all different manifestations.

There is a need to initiate discussions which can identify common issues.

The use of Xenotransplantation could cause emotional problems; having a pig's heart takes a lot of adjustment.

Question 3

We need much more focussed investigation of alternatives to the current uses of animals. There has been a welcome reduction in the number of animals used; but current proposals on Safety of Chemicals are likely to call for large numbers of unnecessary tests on materials of low toxicity anyway. Regulatory Authorities could help by avoiding the temptation to have more tests just in case.

There is also a wide field for sharing of test results, especially as research in popular areas tends to be duplicated.

The obvious alternative to much of this routine testing, and even of drug evaluation, is simple in vitro systems; techniques of cell culture are developing, and their use should be encouraged. There is a case for public support for this sector, which is less likely to have commercial spin-off.

Question 5

Regulations in this area, as in so many, tend to be pigeon-holed.

The Animals Act clearly has points in common with other regulations, affecting farm animals, animal transport, wild animals, dog breeding, pet shops, etc. There must surely be a consensus on what is an acceptable standard of animal welfare.

In general, experimental animals seem to be well cared for, in spite of the disclosures of the protesters; but should issues like the segregation of dogs, a social animal, not be faced.

Animal care staff generally seem to like their charges, and do their best for them; perhaps more rigorous inspection should identify deviations.

Experimental animals are in many ways better cared for than household pets, which are often overfed, underexercised, and kept alive by surgical intervention long after their natural lifespan has been exceeded.

There seems no point in a special licence to breed GM animals, once a breed line is established, which is different from requirements for breeding any other species.

Cost-benefit seems a strange ingredient of such research if expressed in solely money terms, as the value of non-commercial success is difficult to measure. But is appropriate if expressed in terms of pain relief against pain endured.

There is little doubt that if regulation is increased, or illegal protest continues, animal research will move to much less regulated countries .

Question 6

The information fed to the public at present tends to be more sensational than informative. Like much of the perception of science, it leads to the conclusion :

"Don't confuse me with facts – my mind's made up"

Any short term solution to this problem is almost impossible. But this consultation makes a very good start, by asking the sort of questions to which everybody needs and deserves answers.

Most major institutions should be able to provide balanced assessments, and many do.

It is a pity that the media on the whole do not; but then they write for their public.

Some researchers are also to blame. Several recent scares have resulted from an early rush to print on inadequate evidence; it then becomes difficult to decide how much evidence is needed.

Yes, by all means put a label on a medicine container stating it was not tested on animals; but like cosmetics labelling, ignoring the fact that all its constituents were. And the more words on a label, the fewer people will bother to read.