HELLENIC NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMISSION

Q1: What is your view about the use of animals in research?

The Commission endorses the view that vertebrate animals always require respectful handling and humane use. In particular, with regard to the use of vertebrate animals in research the Commission strongly supports the principles of the "three Rs". Moreover the Commission reckons that the higher the cognitive ranking of an animal species the more stringent conditions for experimentation should apply. Thus, special treatment should be accorded to those vertebrates, such as birds and mammals, which are known to possess problem-solving abilities while only exceptional conditions could justify the use of Great Apes given there is strong evidence of possessing a theory of mind.

Q2: What are your views about the use of genetically modified animals in research?

Certain members of the Commission held the view that the use of genetically modified animals in research does not raise new ethical issues since conventional breeding can also lead to the creation of animals exhibiting traits accompanied with adverse welfare effects. Other members of the Commission regard animal genetic modification as fundamentally different from conventional breeding either because it is considered as unnatural or because of adverse welfare issues inherent to the method. In regard to the bottom line of this position, the fact that a large number of animals must be used before a single genetically modified animal, capable of transmitting the modification to its progeny, is obtained renders the method profoundly different from conventional breeding techniques. In addition, animal genetic modification requires highly invasive procedures and therefore by its nature involves increased animal distress if not suffering. Therefore, animal genetic modification compared to conventional breeding raises new ethical issues and requires at least special consideration during the ethical assessment of research approval.

Q3: What is your view about the use of alternatives?

The Commission strongly supports further research into alternatives especially in regard to toxicity testing. Such research activities should get funding mainly from the chemical industry involved in drug development. In general institutions, be it private or public, using animals in research should be encouraged to participate and/or fund research into alternatives. Participation to research funding by those institutions should be proportional to their animal use.

Q4: What is your view about ethical issues relating to the use of animals in research?

a. In general

The Commission recognizes that humanity ascribes moral significance to animals and therefore we have certain duties and responsibilities towards other animal species. The Commission endorses the view that our duties and responsibilities towards other animal species, and especially vertebrates, are shaped by the degree to which we recognize similarities and identify with them. The Commission stresses that historical and societal parameters affect animal treatment by humans. Animal evolution explains much of what humans recognise as similarities with other animal species and thus underlie the procedure of psychological identification with them. Thus biological considerations, such as the neurophysiological development of animal species, can be used as a mean for assigning duties and responsibilities toward other animal species.

b. Restrictions in research

Given that animals are not considered to have moral status per se, it is justified their use for research purposes. Nevertheless, the fact that animals should be ethically considered imposes on us a certain kind of conduct.
Therefore, any unjustified animal loss or suffering is unacceptable. Research involving animals of any kind, being at risk of loss or suffering: a) should have a certain degree of importance (i.e. medical research), b) should be avoided if there are alternative methods for getting the expected scientific information, c) if unavoidable, should reduce to the extent possible the number and/or distress of the animals used.
The sentient nature of vertebrate animals leads us to accept concepts fitting to the human condition (such as 'pain', 'suffering' etc), when describing a physical condition of them. Thus, vertebrate animal research should take into consideration the ecology and physiology of the species in order: a) to determine optimal housing conditions and b) to avoid experimental procedures that may produce physical or psychological pain, as much as possible. Only highly important medical research can justify painful methods, in cases where there is not alternative to get the expected information.

More specifically, there is not absolute evidence that research involving animals, being at risk of loss or suffering, is always necessary to get valid scientific information; From a moral point of view, in every particular case we

should demonstrate that there are not alternatives and, thus, the use of animals is unavoidable.

However, even in the absence of available alternative methods, not all research purposes justify the use of animals since the expected gain of a research activity must always outweigh the risk of rendering instrumental the moral agents involved. Therefore, according to the recognized moral status of the animals needed for experimentation research purposes can be judged as: a) trivial and, thus, the use of animals is unacceptable, b) important but not justifying research in vertebrate animals, c) important and justifying research in vertebrate animals, d) indispensable to the degree that justifies the use of primates and even that of Great Apes[1].

[1] It is worth mentioning that this kind of research seems currently acceptable not only in animals but also in humans. See, for instance, the Article 17 para. 2 of the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (Oviedo Convention), stating that:

"Exceptionally and under the protective conditions prescribed by law, where the research has not the potential to produce results of direct benefit to the health of the person concerned, such research may be authorised subject to the conditions laid down in paragraph 1, sub-paragraphs i, iii, iv and v above, and to the following additional conditions:

i the research has the aim of contributing, through significant improvement in the scientific understanding of the individual's condition, disease or disorder, to the ultimate attainment of results capable of conferring benefit to the person concerned or to other persons in the same age category or afflicted with the same disease or disorder or having the same condition;

ii the research entails only minimal risk and minimal burden for the individual concerned".

Although the Convention is not accepted by a number of States of the Council of Europe (among them the UK), there is no doubt that it represents officially a current ethical trend in Europe.