

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:

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QUESTIONS ANSWERED:

1. Background: the use of animals in research

ANSWER:

Yes, research involving animals does provide information that is not available by any other method, but only in a small percentage of cases are these results be transferable to humans. There can never be any justification for using animals for any research that causes injury or death to those animals, in the same way as there could never be any justification for similar research on human children. The only justifiable research would be of the type that the researcher, and ethical committees, would be happy to be done to a human child. Yes, I do believe that animals do suffer in research, and I accept that in many cases all possible safeguards are put in place to minimise this suffering. But suffering is not fundamentally the issue, because if it was then we would all feel happy for human children to be used provided they didn't suffer. Making suffering an issue is just trying to avoid the reality that this type of research is basically immoral.

2. Genetically modified animals

ANSWER:

I don't think that GM animals raise any new issues, that are not already there in conventional breeding; they just make a bad situation worse by increasing the likelihood that animals, used by humans in this way, will suffer and be deprived of a 'natural' life. But I do feel that the whole issue of 'natural' versus 'unnatural' is yet another smoke-screen to hide the real issue, which is that animals should not be treated as human property to do with as we will. Obviously, from what I've written above, I don't accept that any of these animals should be created. But given that they are already being created, and will continue to be so, I do feel more strongly about some than others. Most abhorrent would be modifications that take away, from the animal, any possibility of a healthy 'natural' life-span. Next would be modifications that are purely for the benefit of humans, and have no value to the animal itself (for example the recent glowing fish). And I suppose least distasteful would be modifications done for the purposes of veterinary medicine, to correct genetic congenital diseases. I think that the most controversial area of research involving animals, in the future, will be GM. Other areas of research, which have not been discussed, would include xeno-transplantation, cross species chimeras (possibly including human as one of the species), commercialisation of animal GM for the pet trade, ...

3. Alternatives

ANSWER:

I think that the whole basis of such research needs to be re-evaluated. Many of the alternatives, toxicity testing on tissue cultures, computer design of new drugs, etc. just seek to provide equivalent replacement procedures for those in the existing product development process. The ending of the use of animals, for unethical scientific research, should go hand in hand with embracing a new paradigm of human endeavour. We should invest more in the information processing capabilities, that new technology is opening

up, and try to use this to better understand the wealth of data that we should be collecting from medical practitioners the world over. Much has been said about the wonder drugs that we could be losing every time a plant species becomes extinct, or a traditional medicine if overlooked, but we also ignore much that is happening within our own hospitals. How many times have I read of people who, when given a drug for one condition actually find it instead helps with some other chronic condition. By concentrating on the reductionist strategy of experimenting on genetically identical laboratory animals we miss the big picture that is the mass of clinical data that we now, for the first time, have the computing capacity and power to collect and analyse - every patients medical history, diet, genealogy, etc.

4. Ethical issues

ANSWER:

I think that the moral status of all living things is a continuum, with large mammals (primates, elephants, whales, etc.) at the top and bacteria at the bottom. The issue is where we draw the line between those that deserve life and liberty and those that we think it's acceptable to use, in any way we see fit. As individuals, throughout our lifetimes, and the world community, throughout history, we have drawn this line at different places; but the trend has always been, and I hope will continue to be, to extend life and liberty to more and treat less as property. Personally I include anything with a nervous system above the line, but exclude human parasites solely in the interest of self preservation. I think it's as hard to 'reliably' extend concepts of pain and suffering to other humans as it is to animals, and yet we usually give other people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they share the same interests in their own wellbeing that we see in ourselves. Why should we feel different about animals, many of whom I find it easier to empathise with than with some other humans.

5. The regulations

ANSWER:

I think that all of the current legislation is woefully inadequate.

6: Providing information to the public

ANSWER:

I think, that at the minimum, all research should be conducted under CCTV cameras in the knowledge that, after the research was complete, the names of those conducting the research and the video be made publicly available. I'm not sure that there are any institutions or publications that I trust to give me a balanced view. I feel that the only way to obtain a balanced view is to read as much as possible from various sources, but to never completely trust any of it. I feel that all products, medicines, food, consumer goods, etc. should be labelled with full constituents/ingredients and whether or not they were developed/tested on animals.