

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.

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QUESTIONS ANSWERED:

1. Background: the use of animals in research

ANSWER:

Research involving animals provides information only about the species upon which it is conducted. Even this information may be flawed, as the stress experienced by the animals may influence the results of the experiment. It is neither reliable nor safe to extrapolate from one species to another. The acceptability of using animals does not depend on the purpose of the research. It cannot be acceptable to inflict suffering on one individual for the benefit of another. It is not acceptable to abuse an individual because it has less strength or less intelligence, whether that individual be a human infant or intellectually impaired adult, or a member of another species. It is the use of a "sliding scale" of value which allowed such atrocities as the Tuskegee experiment in the USA in the 1950s, where black human beings were used as experimental subjects without their consent or knowledge in investigations of the treatment of syphilis. It is clear to any unbiased individual that animals suffer during research. The degree of suffering depends on the conditions in which the animals are kept and the kind of research being carried out. For example, for animals with highly developed social behaviour, keeping them isolated is enough to cause suffering. Many laboratory animals are subjected to severe mental and physical deprivation. Because an animal cannot express the level of its discomfort in a way comparable to ours (by speech or writing) we should not assume it does not suffer.

2. Genetically modified animals

ANSWER:

The issues raised by genetic modification of animals for research are the same as for general research - they are issues of exploitation and suffering. However, genetic modification extends the potential for abuse. The issue of whether or not genetic modification can be considered natural is not an issue. Our own lives could be viewed as "unnatural" in many ways - fortunately for us in developed countries many of the "unnatural" aspects of our lives have brought us great benefits through medical and technological advances. No animal should be "created" for the purposes of another. Manipulation of species is at best likely to have long-term effects we cannot be aware of at this stage, and at worst creates creatures designed to suffer. The notion that humans can "create" individuals or species only encourages the abuse of power and the commodification of other species to an ever greater degree. I hope that in the future the most controversial area of research involving animals will be the basic question of the rights of sentient beings not to be abused.

3. Alternatives

ANSWER:

There is a great need for more research on alternatives to animals in research. If there was a ban on the use of animals, there would be a much greater effort to replace them. As it is, researchers carry on with what they know and research grants are given to projects using traditional animal models. The research industry is under no real pressure to seek alternatives. Research into alternatives should be funded ideally through general

taxation, as should medical research generally. This would remove the profit imperative and allow knowledge to be shared according to need and not to wealth. However, given the current economic system, any organisation currently using animals should be required to pay a levy to fund meaningful and extensive research into alternatives. There is currently a huge amount of duplication as companies race to be the first to produce new products. The way in which research is reported in scientific journals is a cause for concern. It is very much a closed society, with the scientific community by and large accepting without question the use of animals. The language used in the reports is often very bland and misleading, for example animals "vocalise", are "sacrificed" and are generally not treated as sentient individuals.

4. Ethical issues

ANSWER:

I believe animals have the same moral status as any sentient being including humans. It is possible that some animals, for example invertebrates, do not suffer in the same way as mammals, birds, etc. However, we do not know (because we are unable to understand them sufficiently) and should therefore always give the benefit of the doubt. In not too distant history, distinctions between the moral status of different categories have been used to justify slavery and the oppression of women - it is now generally accepted that it is wrong to categorize humans in this way. I believe it is also wrong to apply this principle to other species. We can only know that other humans experience pain, suffering, distress and happiness from the evidence of our own eyes and ears. Simple observation gives us a great deal of information of the same kind for other species. We cannot know how much another individual suffers, whatever its species (including human). Two individuals can experience the same situation and have different responses. However, we should respect that we should not cause any level of suffering. Science has frequently erred on the side of supposed lack of self-awareness or self-consciousness of individuals - to the extent that up to the 20th century it was a common belief that newborn human infants could not feel pain. Research to investigate how animals experience the world would only be acceptable to me if it was done without any impact on the individuals concerned - ie by observation of animals in their natural environment. Invasive procedures are entirely unacceptable. Human economic and social activity is largely based on the exploitation of other species. However, my preference would be to see the use of animals for medical research, food, clothing and sport all prohibited. The debate over how we live with the other species with which we share the planet is a complicated one, and there is not space to discuss it here.

5. The regulations

ANSWER:

Current provision for the assessment of welfare of animals is entirely inadequate and weighted in favour of the status quo. This applies to research and also to animals used for food production and in sport. Such regulation as exists is inadequately funded so there are too few inspectors. In my view there should be no experimentation on animals. The argument that stricter regulation in the UK would drive researchers abroad is flawed. Progress has to start somewhere. This kind of argument was used against the abolition of slavery.

6: Providing information to the public

ANSWER:

I think the public should be given as much information as possible - although not everyone would be pleased to know about it. Such evidence as the Imutran Diaries of Despair and video footage taken inside research establishments should be used. At present, those with political and financial interests in keeping the status quo and supporting the vivisection industry have far more control over what is and is not published than those with opposing points of view, often for purely commercial and economic reasons. Medicines developed using research with animals should give a full description of which animals and how many were used, and what happened to those animals.