

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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I would like to offer some comments on this topic.

Regarding the moral status of animals, I think this relates to how much they are capable of experiencing suffering. Suffering is based on pain and distress which are basic features of all animal life. Animals are programmed to survive, and the function of pain and distress is to motivate creatures to avoid or escape from danger. Your statistics show that mice are by far the most commonly used animal in research, implying that they are regarded as morally inferior. Yet a mouse will clearly exhibit suffering in a threatening situation by, for example, shaking, defaecating and trying to escape, in the same way as a human being would. To say that lower animals do not experience pain in the same way as humans because of their inferior intellect overlooks the fact that the areas of the brain responsible for pain and fear are "primitive" subcortical structures in humans (as in other animals) which by-pass the intellect.

In the light of this, I feel it is good that Britain has the most rigorous system of legal regulation in the world and that experimentation has halved in the past 25 years. This is a trend which will hopefully continue.

At the same time, we need to see this in context. For example a much, larger number of animals are killed for food and, given that vegetarianism is a viable diet, it could be argued that all this killing is unnecessary. To say that animals have an equal moral status to humans is not necessarily to assert that all experimentation should be stopped immediately. Certainly, I cannot see a justification for the use of animal experiments for consumer purposes (e.g. perfumes, "me too" medications).

One way forward is the suggestion of increased research in alternatives to using animals in experiments. A way of funding this research would be to introduce a levy on researchers using animals. For example, drug companies could pay a percentage of their animal research budget (say, 20-50%) to a central agency which would then fund research on alternatives to animals. Similarly, funding bodies could give a percentage of their animal research grants to this agency. It may be that these extra funds would ultimately be passed on to the consumer but this is likely to decrease as economic alternatives to animal experiments become available. In any case it seems an appropriate recompense for the privilege of using animals to benefit us in this way.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on this and hope that this contribution helps to take the discussion forward.

Neil Rothwell