

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.

Committee for Ethical Issues in Medicine (Royal College of Physicians of London-Professor Ray Tallis)

1. What is your view about the use of animals in research?

We believe that medical science cannot make progress without the use of animals in research. Although not all results in animals can be transferred to humans, we have no doubt that many physiological (& patho-physiological) mechanisms can only be explored using animals and that results have a general validity extending to humans.

The acceptability of using animals depends on the purposes of the research: in some human diseases there are no good animal models; while different types of research require the use of different animals. For example, teratogenesis varies in different species (for which thalidomide provides a good example).

The suffering of animals varies according to the nature of the experiment. It is our view that regulations for animal research in the UK limit this to an acceptable minimum. For example, it is likely that producing tumours in animals may involve at least some suffering; but the importance of such research justifies such experimentation.

2. What are your views about the use of genetically modified animals in research?

The higher primates raise particular difficulties because of their close similarity to humans. It would not be acceptable, in our view, to create species that represent interbreeding between human and animal species. On the other hand, the 'infection' of a mouse with pig gene (for example) is no more objectionable than the xenotransplantation.

3. What is your view about the use of alternatives?

There has been considerable pressure to find alternatives to research in animals. Expenditure is currently low. It seems to us that alternatives are likely to vary with the nature of the process under study. We would not support direct expenditure of large sums to find alternatives as we think these unlikely to be fruitful and there is shortage of research funding for so many worthwhile projects. Industry will no doubt develop alternatives for drug screening (e.g) if this is thought to be more reliable or significantly more economical.

We have no major concerns about the way research involving animals is reported in scientific journals.

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

Animals are deserving of respect as part of the created order. We do not believe that the concept of 'rights' is helpful or valid. Our moral intuitions suggest that the moral status of a mosquito is less than a monkey, of an ant less than an antelope. We have no compunction about the killing of lower forms of life where they are inimical to human interests e.g. slugs eating our vegetables, or mosquitoes carrying malaria.

It is easy to use concepts of pain & suffering to higher animals (e.g. most mammals) but these concepts become less meaningful as one moves from vertebrates to invertebrates. Even among vertebrates, it is difficult to estimate what suffering might mean to most fish. Among higher forms of life we can only estimate suffering from behavioural features familiar to us from humans. We believe that there may be some simple form of self awareness in some higher species but acknowledge that self-consciousness is impossible to ascertain.

5. What is your view about UK regulations on research involving animals in the UK?

Current provisions for the assessment of the welfare of animals are appropriate. As the report points out, UK regulations are the strictest in the world and no further tightening is appropriate: this will drive researchers abroad and impede research. Welfare assessments should be made both before and during projects.

6. What do you think about the information that is available to the public about research involving animals?

Better information about the importance of animal research is required. Many members of the public do not have a realistic view of this. The benefits need to be highlighted when medical advances are announced, rather than only reporting the human studies that come at the end of a long investigational process that involves animals. Unfortunately, there is widespread suspicion of governmental reports and of the research community itself. We believe that the labelling of medicines with information about the role on animals in the medicine's development would be helpful in educating the public. Such information could (and would be best) be basic: e.g. a statement that 'this medicine was developed through a research programme involving the use of animals'.