

Animal Experimentation Ethics Committees in the United Kingdom

Introduction

In April 1999, the UK Government introduced a requirement for an ethical review process in all establishments using live animal subjects for experimental purposes. The Home Office did not lay down any precise mechanism for this ethical review process other than a requirement that it should be satisfactory to inspectors employed to enforce the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPAs) that regulates animal experiments in the UK. The requirement for a local ethical review process is now a standard condition for every designated user and breeding/supplying establishment. This development follows a

period when several interested groups and proponents of animal rights have recommended that there be such a review process in the UK.

The RSPCA (UK) looked at how animal experimentation ethics committees (AEECs) should be set up (Jennings, 1994). It stated that the function of the AEECs should be to assist the certificate holders and other named persons in discharging their duties under the ASPA. The AEECs should also promote awareness of animal welfare issues and generate initiatives to apply the concepts of reduction, refinement and replacement to animal experiments. They might also assist in communicating to the public issues concerning animal experiments. The report stat-

ed that special consideration should be given to the presence of lay members on AEECs.

Another influential report was produced in 1995 by The Boyd Group which comprises individuals concerned with the ethics of animal research drawn from a wide range of groups including scientists, animal welfare organisation representatives, philosophers and veterinarians (The Boyd Group, 1995). The Report stated that any means of improving the process of ethical review of research involving animals should satisfy three main requirements. First, it should ensure the ethical acceptability of all research projects involving animals. In practice this means ensuring that they are scientifically necessary and of high quality; and that, wherever possible, the use of animals is replaced, refined or reduced. Second, it should improve public confidence in the review process. Third, it should enable those responsible for ensuring the acceptability of work in their institutions to carry out their duties as efficiently and effectively as possible. The Group felt that such committees could enhance the review process by widening consultation and providing a clear

institutional focus for the consideration of relevant ethical issues.

The Boyd Group highlighted some potential difficulties with the introduction of such committees. They were concerned that there was a possibility that AEECs might contradict or duplicate the role of the Home Office and lead to a non-uniformity of policy on animal issues across the country. They might increase bureaucracy and cost, cause delays or restrict research, and might compromise the confidentiality of scientific work in progress.

However, the Boyd Group Report also highlighted the potential benefits of establishing AEECs. These included the creation of a forum for the discussion of best practice, the encouragement of best practice within institutions, the widening of consultation on animal research issues and the committees' potential role in helping to create an environment in which broader educational benefits might follow within an institution. It would also provide an avenue of communication with groups outside the institution.

The Report examined the potential membership of

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This issue contains the Facts Sheet on the Importation, quarantine and monitoring of laboratory animals, particularly rodents, for issue in Australia. The Facts Sheet is also available as an offprint

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