



Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching

## The National Statistics Package — background and progress

In 1989, the Australian Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare recommended that a summary of the animals used in teaching and research should be produced by each State and Territory and that these should be collated on a national basis. This recommendation has been extremely difficult to put into practice for several reasons. The definition of "Research and Teaching" varies between States. In some cases, wildlife environmental studies are not included. Similarly, animals held in schools and kindergartens may or may not be included. To make the problem even more difficult, States required different information and reported data in different formats which were not compatible. Despite the difficulties, it has been acknowledged since 1989 that there is a need for a clear, concise and accurate mechanism for reporting such data.

A statistical collection system must be accurate, simple, concise, easy to use and easy to collate. As the level of computer literacy is also highly variable, any computerised system has to be simple. Detail had to be minimised but essential data had to be collected for the figures to be meaningful. The biggest impediment to the collation of statistics has been the sheer volume of projects considered by Animal Ethics Committees (AECs). The development of databases, particularly software development kits which are compatible with both the Windows and Macintosh environments, has made an almost impossible task much easier. Before a database could be developed, consensus had to be reached on what data were to be collected and in what detail. The revision of the Code provided the vehicle for determining what was to be included. A set of parameters was defined and endorsed by the NHMRC Code Liaison Group, and the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (NCCAW), in conjunction with the States and other interested parties.

New South Wales and Victoria have produced annual statistical reports for some years. However, the methodologies used have been different. Collation was difficult because animals were counted several times if projects were approved by more than one committee, or if one animal was used for several purposes. Terminology also presented problems. A rat could be recorded as a Hooded Wistar, a *Rattus norvegicus* or simply as a rat in different returns. To overcome these problems, the NHMRC Code Liaison Group recommended that standard data be collected across the nation using common names and be collated in a consistent manner.

A trial version of a database statistics package was developed and the South Australian AECs agreed to test the system during the 1995/96 financial year. Feedback from those Committees, the NHMRC Code Liaison Group, NCCAW and other interested parties on a national basis was obtained. With the assistance of funding provided by the NHMRC, the database was then modified and refined.

The package has been endorsed by the NHMRC Animal Welfare Committee and distributed to all States and Territories for acceptance and implementation.

The database will be trialed on a national basis during 1997. Each State and Territory will be responsible for collating its own data and ANZCCART will collate the data on a national level. If all deadlines are met (which is probably optimistic), the first national summary will be completed for the 1997 year by mid-1998.

The package, and the accompanying instruction book *A Beginner's Guide to the Animal Use Statistics Package* will evolve over the next few months as people try it out and pin-point any difficulties they discover.

By the end of the year, an upgraded version of the package will be incorporated into the home page of the ANZCCART Web site. This will enable AECs and researchers to download the database without having to obtain and load disks. Similarly, collation of data will be even easier.

For many years, there has been considerable public interest in animal based research. People want to know what sort of animals are used, what is done to them, how many animals are involved and why the research is done. The statistics package aims to answer those questions in terms which are meaningful and relevant. Within the limits of commercial confidentiality and individual privacy, the public has a right to know how its money is spent and what actually happens to the animals involved. By using simple language and identifying the key issues, the database will be able to answer those questions. Through all stages of development, the emphasis has been on developing an accurate, clear and simple mechanism to obtain meaningful data relating to animal use in research and teaching.

We now have the ability to act on the recommendation which the Senate Select Committee made eight years ago. The financial and moral assistance given by the NHMRC has made that ideal possible. The comments received from animal welfare groups, researchers and other interested parties have made the data relevant to the people who will use it. The availability of the ANZCCART Web site has made it accessible. The package will evolve according to feedback received. Everything is in place but it can only work with your participation and support.

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