

Public participation in informed decision-making on animal use in Canada

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Abstract

In Canada as in most other countries, there is support for the use of animals in science, provided it is scientifically justified and is conducted in accordance with humane principles. The Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) has been Canada's national quasi-regulatory body responsible for overseeing the ethical use of animals in science since 1968.

Ethics is derived from the Greek *ethos* meaning people, the predominant community spirit. A key element of the CCAC system is the involvement of informed and empowered public representatives in all of the CCAC's activities, namely in establishing ethical standards through guidelines development, in informed ethical decision-making at the level of each institutional animal care committee (ACC), in providing sound judgment at each institutional assessment visit performed by the CCAC, and in providing a public perspective on the CCAC Council.

This integrated approach is essential to ensure that an informed and external perspective is actively provided to all discussions and decisions on animal care and use in science, and that those who conduct the experiments are in tune with their obligations to the animals in their care, as well as to the other members of society.

Keywords: ethics, animal care committee, oversight

Introduction

In Canada as in other countries, studies that have considered public acceptance of the use of animals in research have found that approximately 85% of the population support the use of animals for research, provided that there is stringent oversight of that use and that pain and distress is minimized (MORI, 2000; Canadian Public Health Association, 2001; Matfield, 2002; The Gallup Poll, 2007). However, assessing the views of the public about research on animals is difficult and evidence from surveys of public opinion is inconsistent as people often hold conflicting views simultaneously, and surveys are often superficial in their attempts to evaluate what are complex ways of reasoning (Nuffield, 2003).

The principles of humane science, encapsulated as the Three Rs (Russell & Burch, 1959), have become enshrined in legislation regulating the use of animals for scientific purposes in several countries. While the various national systems of oversight may appear to be quite diverse in operation, they have many fundamental elements in common, including: regulation, guidelines and policies which impact on the place, the program of work, the personnel

involved, and the training requirements for key staff. Responsibility for the authorization to carry out animal-based studies may be invested centrally as in the UK, regionally as in several European countries, or locally, through institutional ACCs, as in Canada, US and Australia (Gauthier & Griffin, 2005).

Mautner (1996) defines ethics as the predominant community spirit. It is in this vein that ACCs are able to move beyond the continuing polarized debate on the use of animals in science, to a more enlightened public engagement in concrete, informed ethical decision-making on specific protocols.

The Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) system

Since 1968, the CCAC has been the national peer-based organization, involving over 2,000 scientists, veterinarians, animal care staff, students and representatives from the public and animal welfare movement, with the responsibility for establishing and maintaining standards for the care and use of animals in science. In Canada, the use of animals in science is a provincial responsibility, with the guidelines and policies set by the CCAC serving

as national reference standards. Regulations to provincial legislation in five of the six provinces that have legislated on animal use in science make specific references to CCAC guidelines and policies. The CCAC encourages regulators and funders of research to reference CCAC standards in their legislation and programs at both the federal and provincial levels.

As described in its mission statement, the CCAC acts "... in the interests of the people of Canada to ensure through programs of education, assessment and persuasion that the use of animals, where necessary, for research, teaching and testing employs optimal physical and psychological care according to acceptable scientific standards, and to promote an increased level of knowledge, awareness and sensitivity to relevant ethical principles." In Canada, where there can be no federal legislation in this area due to the Constitutional division of power (Wilson, 1998), the CCAC, as the national quasi-regulatory body has incorporated the principles of humane science (Russell & Burch, 1959) into its fundamental *CCAC policy statement on: the ethics of animal investigation* (CCAC, 1989).

A unique feature of the CCAC system is that it delivers its mandate through three interrelated programs (Assessment; Guidelines; and Education, Training and Communications) that are all peer-based and operate as an integrated system, facilitating the timely transfer of relevant knowledge between the programs, with the ultimate objective to balance scientific evidence, expert opinion, societal concerns and the interests of the animals. Canada is the only country that has evolved a system integrating the delivery of these three programs under the same umbrella organization.

To create a link between the structure of the CCAC (Council and Board of Directors) and the duties described in its By-Laws in relation with the three above mentioned programs, the CCAC implemented a distributed management structure based on two administrative standing committees (Planning & Priorities and Finance), and three others (Assessment, Guidelines, and Education/Training/Communications) mirroring its three programs. Additional expertise, not available from Council, is achieved by the appointment of observers on Council and ad hoc members to any standing committee or subcommittee as needed. Over 2,000 volunteers across the country, including representatives of the public, participate in the CCAC programs and serve on over 220 institutional ACCs. The responsibilities of each standing committee are highlighted below.

- The Assessment Committee – responsible for reviewing and evaluating the functioning of the Assessment Program, reviewing institutional assessment and implementation reports and assigning a CCAC Compliance Status to

institutions.

- The Guidelines Committee – responsible for reviewing and evaluating the functioning of the Guidelines Program, identifying the need for CCAC guidelines, and coordinating their development.
- The Education, Training and Communications Committee – responsible for identifying educational and training needs and priorities, and for developing and operating an educational resource program for animal users.

Community representation at all levels of the CCAC system

Another key element of the CCAC system is the engagement of public/community representatives in all of the CCAC's activities, namely in:

- ethical decision-making at the level of each institutional ACC;
- providing sound judgment on each CCAC assessment panel;
- establishing ethical standards through guidelines development; and
- providing a public perspective on the CCAC Council and its committees.

This integrated approach is the first of five main ways through which the CCAC is accountable to the Canadian public (CCAC, 2006b). It is also essential to ensure that an external perspective is actively provided to all discussions and decisions on animal care and use in science, and that those who conduct the experiments are in tune with their obligations to the animals in their care, as well as to the other members of society.

1. Community representation on ACCs

Canada is recognized (Orlans, 1989) as having pioneered the establishment of ACCs as the keystone of its ethical review and oversight system for the use of animals in science. There are over 220 ACCs, each structured as a microcosm of society, including local community representatives, veterinarians, scientists, animal care staff and students. They are established under the *CCAC policy statement on: terms of reference for animal care committees* (CCAC, 2006b) to ensure local quality control, with the CCAC at the national level providing quality assurance of institutional animal care and use programs.

Characteristics, selection and term

Community representatives come from all walks of life; they can, for example, be members of a humane society, retirees, lawyers, homemakers, business people, teachers, ethicists, or members of the clergy. Community representatives can have any background as long as they do not use animals for scientific purposes, they are not affiliated in any way

with the institution that they will be working with, and they do not have any conflict of interest that would compromise their role. Their most important qualifications are to be actively interested in the care and use of animals, to be willing and able to work constructively with the members of animal care and use programs to address ethical dilemmas posed by science, and to be ready to undertake a certain amount of work and learning, depending on the size and complexity of the institution that they will be working with. Community representatives are selected either by the members of institutional ACCs, or by the institution itself in collaboration with the ACC. Like other ACC members, they are appointed for terms of no less than two years and no more than four years, renewable only up to a maximum of eight consecutive years of service.

Role and responsibilities

The role of community representative on an ACC requires a considerable time commitment and is usually non-remunerative. A new community representative must invest time to learn about the ACC's functions by reviewing: the Terms of Reference of the ACC; minutes of the past year's meetings; and institutional policies and procedures relating to the animal care and use program. The community representative must also become knowledgeable about: the mandate of the institution and its organization; the type of research, teaching or testing carried out at the institution; and CCAC policies and guidelines.

On an ongoing basis, the responsibilities of the community representative include: reviewing all animal use protocols and other ACC documents; being present at ACC meetings and other activities; participating actively in the protocol review process; touring the animal facility at least once a year; participating in the development and review of institutional animal care and use policies and procedures; and being present for CCAC assessment visits.

2. Community Representation on CCAC Assessment Panels

Assessment visits are the quality assurance system of the CCAC Assessment Program. Assessment panel members represent the CCAC, providing peer expertise to review all aspects of the care and use of animals for research, teaching and testing by an institution. Through this work, the panel members both support the accomplishments of the institutional ACC and animal care and use program members who work to implement the CCAC guidelines within their institutions, and make recommendations for improvements, as necessary, to ensure that the animal care and use program meets the standards of the

CCAC Program (CCAC, 1999). Full assessment visits are carried out by CCAC assessment panels, each composed of a community representative, and scientific and veterinary representatives. A CCAC assessment director organizes, and is present at, every assessment visit as an *ex officio* member of the assessment panel. The assessment directors select veterinary and scientific panel members according to their expertise, experience and ability to assess each institution.

Characteristics and selection

Community representatives on assessment panels come from many different backgrounds, but are typically either employees or members of humane societies or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS), or are community representatives on other institutional ACCs. Employees and members of humane societies or SPCAs often bring solid, practical experience with regard to animal housing and care to the panel, and community representatives on ACCs bring a great deal of valuable experience with regard to ACC functioning, protocol review, and animal care and use program functioning.

Community representatives who are interested in participating as volunteers on CCAC assessment panels may contact the CFHS and/or the CCAC; they will be asked to fill out a questionnaire to indicate their interests and experience, and to indicate any ACCs that they are presently serving on. Community representatives are selected from the CFHS register of community representatives. The community representative chosen for an assessment visit is usually from the geographical area of the institution. All panel members are selected for their experience and ability to be actively involved in the process, and to communicate clearly and constructively with their peers on the panel and in the institution to be assessed.

Role and responsibilities

CCAC assessments consist of several distinct phases, which take place over several months or sometimes years. Panel members participate as a team in each of these phases. Panel members review all relevant pre-assessment documentation before the assessment visit, so that they are prepared to discuss any specific concerns that they may identify. Panel members also need to be familiar with the policies and guidelines of the CCAC. A pre-assessment meeting of panel members is held at a convenient time prior to the visit, to review the goals of the assessment, the institution's pre-assessment documentation, the results of the previous assessment visit, and any other issues related to the visit.

During the assessment visit, an initial meeting between the CCAC panel, members of the institutional ACC, senior institutional representatives, members of the veterinary and animal care staff, and researchers is conducted at the institution. The panel members, led by the Chair, then ask questions based on the information provided by the institution in the *Animal Care and Use Program Review Form*. During the site visit, the panel members tour the various animal facilities, including animal holding rooms, procedure rooms (which may include investigators' laboratories), and support areas (e.g., washing areas, storage areas, etc.). Following the site visit, and prior to the final meeting with the institutional representatives, the assessment panel meets (*in camera*) to discuss any concerns resulting from the visit and to finalize the recommendations that will be presented verbally at the final meeting.

Following the assessment visit, a draft report prepared by the CCAC Secretariat is circulated to panel members and to members of the Assessment Committee for comments and approval. The senior administrator in charge of the animal care and use program must submit an implementation report or reports to address the recommendations contained in the assessment report. Once they are received, the implementation reports are circulated to assessment panel members and to the CCAC Assessment Committee for information and comments, and the Assessment Committee will then assign a CCAC status to the institution.

3. Public contribution to guidelines development

Since 1997, guidelines have been developed and revised in response to the current and emerging needs of the research community, advances in laboratory animal care, and in conjunction with the needs of the CCAC Assessment Program. For each new guidelines document, the CCAC Guidelines Committee is responsible for establishing a subcommittee of experts on the topic. These experts work together with members of the Guidelines Sector of the CCAC Secretariat to produce a first draft of the guidelines. Once the first draft is acceptable to the Guidelines Committee, it is circulated to a select group of experts for review.

Feedback from these experts is reviewed by the subcommittee members and used to produce a second draft, which is posted on the CCAC website for widespread review. During this review, comments are requested from all interested parties, including national and international experts, CCAC constituents and the general public likely to be affected by the guidelines, and CCAC Council members. All community representatives are invited to consult the CCAC website regularly and comment on any new draft guidelines that are posted.

4. Public perspective on CCAC Council

Article 5f of CCAC's corporate By-Laws states that "the CCAC shall involve Animal Welfare Associations of Canada in the CCAC's activities and programs" as part of its duties. A founding member of the CCAC, the CFHS is the national body whose purpose is to promote compassion and humane treatment for all animals. Members of the CFHS include over 100 humane societies, shelters and SPCAs from all provinces and territories in Canada, as well as organizations that address specialized animal welfare issues. The CFHS strives to:

- prevent cruelty to animals, recognizing that all animals have intrinsic value, remarkable complexity, inherent dignity, and are subjects of moral concern;
- proceed from the principle that no-one has the right to cause physical or mental pain or suffering to any animal;
- work within the law and in cooperation with government, scientific, and industry bodies to achieve practical and positive solutions to pressing animal welfare issues; and
- promote, through programs of advocacy and humane education, a more balanced and caring relationship between humans and animals in our society.

Unlike most other member organisations of the CCAC Council that have only one representative, the CFHS has three voting representatives. In addition to the key role played by the CFHS in the registry of community representatives on CCAC assessment panels, the CCAC Standing Rules mandate that one of the three CFHS representatives on Council must necessarily be a member of the Assessment Committee assigning CCAC status to institutions participating in the CCAC Program. Finally, in order to better support the essential work of community representatives, the CFHS and the CCAC developed jointly a comprehensive, user-friendly resource, the *CCAC-CFHS Manual for Community Representatives* (CCAC, 2006a), published in September 2006.

Conclusion

The CCAC and the CFHS have worked closely and constructively together over the past 40 years to ensure effective community representation at all levels of the Canadian system for the ethical review and surveillance of animal used for scientific purposes.

In support of the international harmonization of ethical standards for the care and use of animals in science, the CCAC and the CFHS strongly believe that any system for the oversight of the care and use of animals in science must include community representation for the following pressing reasons (CCAC, 2006a):

- to involve members of the public in the decision-making process for the care and use of animals in science;
- to provide scientific institutions and national oversight systems with an external perspective; and
- to provide a means of identifying and addressing public concerns regarding the use of animals in science.

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