

Reports and Comments

Review of research using non-human primates

The use of laboratory animals in scientific procedures in the United Kingdom is highly regulated and, in the case of non-human primates (NHPs), it is intended that they are only used in scientific studies when no other animal species would provide a suitable model and when no alternative methods are available. Additionally, there must be a high likelihood that the research will lead to important medical advances. The number of NHPs used in scientific procedures each year in the UK are relatively small (in 2010 less than 0.1% of the 3.6 million animals used) however, it is thought that the welfare cost to NHPs in a laboratory environment may be greater than for other animals because of their sentience and social nature. In 2006, the report of a working group chaired by Sir David Weatherall, recommended that the major funding bodies of non-human primate research in the UK should systematically review the outcome of all of their research using NHPs over a ten-year period.

Following the Weatherall report, a Review Panel, chaired by Professor Sir Patrick Bateson, carefully assessed research using NHPs between January 1997 and December 2006. Funders of NHP research during this time were the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Wellcome Trust, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research (NC3Rs). The findings of the Review Panel were published in July 2011.

The Panel considered 67 NHP studies and took into account the scientific quality and importance of the research, the probability of medical and public benefit, and the likelihood of animal suffering. An overall assessment was then made as to whether or not the research was acceptable and justifiable in the circumstances. On the whole, the Panel judged that the use of NHPs was justified in the majority of the projects reviewed. However, 9% of the studies raised concerns and the Panel was unable to clearly discern any scientific, medical or social benefit from them. Although the Panel did remark that it can be difficult to assess the benefit of some research since benefits may only become apparent after a lengthy period of time has passed.

The review is written in a balanced manner and examples of research leading to both positive and negative outcomes described. It includes examples where researchers have contributed towards improving NHP welfare in laboratories through the development of new 3Rs techniques, such as: better husbandry practices in marmoset colonies and a new tissue-friendly head implant for use in awake, monkey behaviour studies. In the neuroscience field, brain imaging and non-invasive electrophysiological methods have refined and replaced some primate use. The Panel commented that technological advances are progressing rapidly and that: "It is important that wherever relevant and practical, new technologies should be used actively to deliver 3Rs improvements".

Another point raised by the Panel was the need for all researchers to publish their findings, whether positive or

negative, in order to prevent unnecessary duplication of experiments. Additionally, funding bodies should, when reviewing project proposals, confirm that the research team has a sufficient breadth of skills and resources to ensure successful completion of the project and dissemination of results.

The Report also commented on other issues including the cost of carrying out research in the UK, the safety of researchers due to harassment by extremists, and the manner in which both funders and researchers engage with the public.

Fifteen recommendations were made in all and it is hoped that the review will inform future science and funding strategies with regards to NHP use.

Review of Research Using Non-Human Primates: Report of a Panel Chaired by Professor Sir Patrick Bateson FRS (July 2011). A4, 51 pages. The report is available at: <http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Reviews/review-research-using-nhps.pdf>.

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Animal welfare 'toolkit' for farm animal veterinarians

The New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA), together with the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), published a leaflet in August 2011 for veterinarians to provide practical advice and guidance when dealing with incidents of compromised farm animal welfare.

Veterinarians may become aware of poor on-farm welfare through various routes and the leaflet lays out the different approaches that may be required depending on the circumstances, eg whether they observe a situation themselves when visiting a farm, or if they are called in by an inspector during a formal investigation. A four-step process for dealing with the situation is then described: 1) Assess — how to assess the whole-farm environment; 2) Plan — how best to develop an action plan; 3) Do — how to help the farmer carry out the action plan; and 4) Review — how to agree a timeframe with the farmer for returning to reassess the situation.

Guidance is given throughout on how best to engage with farmers; the aim being to avoid confrontation and to be supportive. It is pointed out that outside factors may contribute to the occurrence of poor welfare, such as financial difficulties, and it is advised that these factors are borne in mind when talking with the farmer and deciding on an appropriate course of action. The welfare of the animals is ultimately the responsibility of the owner or person in charge of the animals and it is important that they take ownership of the situation, are involved with the development of the action plan, and committed to resolving any welfare issues.

Additional useful sections within the leaflet include: advice on being part of an investigation, how best to deal with

interest from the media, points on keeping full and accurate records, relevant legislation, and a list of helpful websites and telephone numbers for both veterinarians and their clients.

The 'toolkit' is aimed at New Zealand veterinarians and some of the information given is specific to New Zealand, eg legislation, however, much of the advice is general and may be a useful starting point for veterinarians in other countries when considering how best to deal with similar situations both on-farm, and in other areas of practice, eg companion animals.

The Veterinarians Animal Welfare Toolkit (August 2011). A4, 41 pages. New Zealand Veterinary Association & Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Leaflet. ISBN 978-0-478-38455-0 (Print) ISBN 978-0-478-38456-7 (Online). Available online at: <http://www.nzva.org.nz/sites/default/files/domain-0/2011%20Vet%20toolkit.pdf>.

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CAWC report on the rescue and re-homing of companion animals

Since 1999, the Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) has undertaken independent studies and offered advice on a wide range of companion animal welfare issues. The most recent addition to their publications is a report on the rescue and re-homing of companion animals.

It is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 surplus companion animals each year in the United Kingdom and the task of re-homing unwanted pets is undertaken by many organisations, ranging from large, well-known charities, such as Dogs Trust and the Blue Cross, to small breed societies and species-specific groups, eg The National Ferret Welfare Society. The CAWC report describes how over the last few years many re-homing organisations have experienced an increase in the number of pets relinquished into their care: Cats Protection noted a 77% increase during the first quarter of 2008 when compared to the same time period in 2007, and the RSPCA took care of 57% more pets in 2008 (11,586 animals) than in 2007 (7,347 animals).

To assess whether the welfare needs of relinquished companion animals are met, CAWC reviewed the current guidelines and protocols of a range of re-homing organisations concerned with cats, dogs, rabbits and ferrets. The re-homing process was categorised into six stages: 1) Assessment and selection of suitable animals for re-homing; 2) Preparation of the animals for life in their new homes; 3) Assessment of prospective new homes and owners; 4) Advice given to prospective owners; 5) Knowledge and communication skills of the staff in the re-homing organisation; and 6) Follow-up procedures after re-homing. The report makes six recommendations covering each of the six re-homing stages.

A core point in the report is the importance of correctly assessing the behaviour of animals that have entered the re-homing process and on implementing appropriate rehabilitation and training programmes where necessary. Behavioural problems are one of the main reasons given by previous owners when relinquishing their pets and also by new owners for returning an animal that they have re-homed. The behavioural assessment process of abandoned animals is one that seems to be carried out with varying degrees of success and CAWC notes that where temperament testing is employed on relinquished dogs that: "It is not always clear whether these provide valid indicators of temperament. Nor is it clear whether they are performed by qualified experts, or enthusiasts with varying degrees of expertise or experience". In relation to dog aggression, the report states: "...understanding about aggression in animals in general, and dogs in particular, are rife with ignorance, misguided theories, and lack of diagnostic skills and development of appropriate remedial action". It is considered by CAWC that there is an "urgent need for informed discussion about aggression... and about the qualifications required for behavioural assessors and advisors about standardisations, validity and value assessments in rescue, and about solutions to the problems raised by aggressive animals".

Other interesting points made by CAWC include the importance of achieving the right balance between confidentiality for previous owners and provision of sufficient information about an animal's history and breeding for rescue staff and prospective owners to fully understand and cater for an individual animal's needs. It is also advised that where guidelines are used for judging the suitability of prospective owners that these are not adhered to in an overly rigid way and that the individual nature of people is recognised: "An overly robust initial screening process for prospective owners can actually eliminate potentially good owners".

The ethical issues surrounding euthanasia and 'no-kill' policies are also discussed and the report recommends that where euthanasia is decided upon as a policy that the decision should be taken by an executive authority, after consideration and discussion, and not by an individual.

The CAWC report gives a good overview of the scale of unwanted animals in the United Kingdom, and the difficulties faced by re-homing organisations, whilst also suggesting a number of positive approaches to improving the future prospects of rescue animals. All those involved in seeking new and lasting homes for unwanted pets will find this report an informative and interesting read.

Rescue and Re-homing of Companion Animals (June 2011). A4, 29 pages. Companion Animal Welfare Council. Available online at: <http://www.cawc.org.uk/reports-completed>.

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