Institution animal care and use committees need greater ethical diversity

Lawrence Arthur Hansen

ABSTRACT
In response to public outrage stemming from exposés of animal abuse in research laboratories, the US Congress in 1985 mandated Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUCs) to oversee animal use at institutions receiving federal grants. IACUCs were enjoined to respect public concern about the treatment of animals in research, but they were not specifically instructed whether or not to perform ethical cost-benefit analyses of animal research protocols that IACUCs have chosen, with approval contingent upon a balancing of animal pain and suffering against a reasonable expectation of resultant human benefit. IACUCs have chosen not to make such ethical judgments but, rather, restrict themselves to an advisory role, often tweaking the details of animal-use protocols, but eventually approving all of them. This disinclination by IACUCs to take a broader ethical view of their authority and responsibilities may reflect a membership composition highly skewed towards animal researchers themselves (67%) and institutional veterinarians (15%), both with vested interests in continuing animal research. The resultant ethical monoculture may impair IACUC’s ability to meet public concern for laboratory animal welfare. Psychological research has established that unconscious bias affects us all, that deliberations among the like-minded lead to adapting extremist positions, and that groupthink blinds organisations to alternatives that might be obvious to outsiders. Taken together, skewed IACUC membership composition and psychological research insights into unconscious bias and groupthink suggest that an infusion of ethical diversity by increasing the membership composition and psychological research insights into unconscious bias and groupthink suggest that an infusion of ethical diversity by increasing the percentage of institutionally unaffiliated members on IACUCs would broaden their ethical perspectives and enable them to better address public concerns about laboratory animal welfare.

INTRODUCTION
Animal use in research and teaching is an ethically contentious issue. Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUCs) were mandated by Congress in 1985 in response to public concern about the welfare of laboratory animals stemming from exposés of abuse in federally funded research laboratories.1 Lawmakers stipulated that IACUCs should ‘respect society’s concerns regarding the welfare of animal subjects’, but the extent to which they were intended to function as animal research ethics committees is unclear in the somewhat ambiguous wording of the legislation itself, and ensuing implementation regulations issued by the Public Health Service and the US Department of Agriculture. Animal protectionists hoped IACUCs would make ethical judgments and reject research protocols when their cost in animal suffering was high and the potential medical benefit to humans was low or non-existent. Some support for that hope can be found in IACUC protocol review requirements which instruct IACUCs to consider US government principles when reviewing protocols, one of which states ‘procedures involving animals should be designed and performed with due consideration of their relevance to human or animal health, the advancement of knowledge, or the good of society’.

IACUC MEMBERSHIP COMPOSITIONS AND PROTOCOL APPROVAL RATES
IACUCs at US research institutions are dominated by animal researchers and institutional employees. Better balanced IACUCs would lessen the risks of bias and groupthink and broaden their deliberations to include ethical dimensions of animal research.


engaged in animal research. Ninety-three percent of IACUC chairpersons were animal researchers. It is not unduly cynical for animal welfare advocates to wonder if an animal-use committee system in which 82% of members and 93% of chairpersons have vested interests in continuing animal research might be subject to an approval bias.

The most comprehensive analysis of IACUC reviews found 98% approval rates for in-house research protocols, but that when the same protocols were evaluated by blinded IACUCs from other institutions, 61% were judged as ‘not very understandable’ or ‘not understandable at all’, as having poor research designs and procedures, or as justifying the type and number of animals in a way that was ‘not very convincing’ or ‘not convincing at all’. The authors concluded that ‘IACUCs will rarely disapprove of protocols that other committees feel should be rejected’. Evidence that IACUCs often approve protocols which do not meet federal standards can also be found in Federal audits, government surveys of US Department of Agriculture laboratory inspectors, and USDA reports.

The predominance of animal researchers, and the institutional veterinarians who support them on IACUCs, may also explain why IACUCs evolved into exclusively technical or advisory committees rather than ethics committees. The great majority of IACUC members have, through their career choices, made clear their allegiance to animal experimentation, and for them the ethical conclusion that the ends justify the means is self-evident. The resultant ethical monoculture of the IACUC committee mind may, therefore, be disinclined to revisit the issue in protocol after protocol. Recall that neither the original 1966 Animal Welfare Act, nor its 1985 amending to mandate the creation of IACUCs, laboratories or the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, nor the NIH guidelines and any other institutional representatives on the one hand, and unaffiliated members on the other. One interview-based Canadian study about the effectiveness of animal research ethics committees reported that three of the six community representatives on the committees found the atmosphere intimidating, two of the six had negative experiences with other committee members, and common problems were the difficulties of being an ‘outsider’ and a perceived lack of appreciation for their contribution. Participants in another interview-based study of US IACUCs expressed a wish for a broader range of people on the committee, such as an ethicist, or more community members.

Interestingly though, and perhaps counterintuitively, a similar interview-based study of animal ethics committees in Sweden, where their composition is almost equally balanced between scientists and laypersons, reported that most interviewees agreed that the committees were discussing the ‘wrong’ question. They all knew that they were supposed to be conducting cost-benefit evaluations, but instead, just like US IACUCs, they addressed almost exclusively experimental methodology. They found themselves discussing refinement questions in great detail, but not research purposes, replacement and reduction. These findings seem to imply that even with a better balance between laypersons and scientists with vested interests in propagating animal research, institutional-based animal research ethics committees will not address broad ethical issues. The authors of the Swedish study attribute this reluctance to ‘situated ethics’ in which context, environment and unspoken strategies are created to make ethical dilemmas easier to handle by avoiding altogether fundamental questions, such as whether it is ever ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to wilfully inflict pain and suffering upon a sentient being. Even if scientific experts are not a majority, they have power over the agenda, and the priority of interpretation belongs exclusively to the scientific ideals, to the exclusion of deeper ethical questions about research purposes and animal suffering.

CONCLUSIONS

The NIH acknowledges that ‘the validity of IACUC actions is always predicated on the existence of a properly constituted IACUC.’ While this statement literally refers to research facilities’ ability to conform to minimum IACUC membership requirements, in a larger sense it encourages us to ask what a ‘properly constituted IACUC’ would look like, and what would its valid actions be. IACUCs have never been explicitly directed to make ethical cost-benefit determinations in deciding to approve or disapprove animal-use protocols, but neither have they been discouraged from doing so by legislation or regulation. IACUCs have chosen not to function as animal ethics committees because of their overwhelming proportions of animal researchers, laboratory animal veterinarians and other members with vested interests in seeing animal experiments approved. But since IACUCs are the only mechanism available for
addressing the ethics of animal research, they should broaden their purely technical scope to consider larger ethical issues, including harm-benefit determinations. Infusing greater ethical diversity into their memberships would further this goal.

Funding None.

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Open Access This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC BY-NC 3.0) license, which permits others to distribute, remix, adapt, build upon this work non-commercially, and license their derivative works on different terms, provided the original work is properly cited and the use is non-commercial. See: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/

REFERENCES

Institution animal care and use committees need greater ethical diversity

Lawrence Arthur Hansen

J Med Ethics 2013 39: 188-190 originally published online November 6, 2012
doi: 10.1136/medethics-2012-100982

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://jme.bmj.com/content/39/3/188

References

This article cites 14 articles, 4 of which you can access for free at:
http://jme.bmj.com/content/39/3/188#BIBL

Open Access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial License, which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non commercial and is otherwise in compliance with the license. See: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/ and http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/legalcode

Email alerting service

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Topic Collections

Articles on similar topics can be found in the following collections

- Open access (107)
- Experiments in vivo (9)
- Research and publication ethics (490)
- Health economics (45)
- Health policy (125)
- Health service research (103)

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/