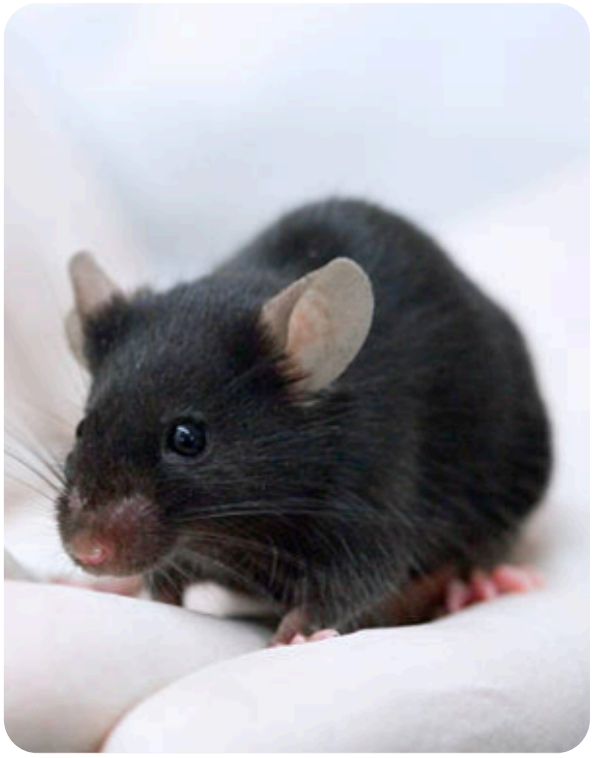
RSPCA ANIMALS IN SCIENCE

Providing ethical advice

Aim of this resource

To help AWERB members identify ethical issues arising from the use of animals in science; and to help them initiate and contribute to ethical discussions.



Relevant AWERB task

Considering ethical issues runs through all AWERB tasks. There is also a specific task to provide a forum for discussion and development of ethical advice to the establishment licence holder on all matters related to animal welfare, care and use at their establishment.

Recommendation

Use this resource to gain greater understanding of what 'ethics' includes and stimulate wider discussion of ethical issues within the AWERB and the establishment as a whole.

The issue

A common belief within AWERBs is that 'doing ethics' just means applying the 3Rs and improving animal welfare, with advice to the establishment licence holder confined to comments on these issues during project review. But ethics encompasses much deeper considerations about what it is, or is not, justifiable to do to animals in the name of science. Recognising and discussing these are essential in developing a more reflective approach to animal use, so that people are more able and willing to question, and challenge, the status quo.

Key points:

- Ethics is a system of moral principles that includes ideas about right and wrong, and how people should, or should not, behave in general and specific instances, summed up by: 'We can do this, but should we'?
- Behaving ethically involves more than just following the letter of the law.
- Societal views evolve over time, so activities that are considered acceptable today may not be so in the future. Discussion of current practices in a 'forum for ethical discussion' can help develop establishment policies on potentially controversial issues.
- The practical application of ethics provides a framework to help decide what it is 'right' to do when faced with dilemmas involving competing interests. The most obvious application of an ethical framework is the harm/benefit analysis that is central to drafting and reviewing a project licence.
- Definition of what counts as an ethical issue can be unclear and therefore hard for people to identify, so there is a tendency to avoid the issue and only focus on the practical issues of animal welfare and the 3Rs.
- Training to understand ethics, as it applies to the use of animals in science, should be provided for all AWERB members.
- A willingness to listen open-mindedly and try to understand different opinions, perspectives, beliefs and values is key to taking part in ethical discussions.
- Day to day decisions also have ethical aspects that require consideration and addressing these is integral to developing an establishment's Culture of Care.
- Ethical principles are an essential component of research integrity, with respect to research funding, conduct and publication.
- Ultimately 'doing ethics' should make a difference! There should be outcomes, and impact - particularly for animals - associated with ethical review.

Background Information:

- **Ethics is a system of moral principles that includes ideas about right and wrong, and how people should, or should not, behave in general and specific instances, summed up by: We can do this, but should we?** The term 'ethics' can be used to describe ways of life (for example, Buddhist or Christian ethics), or to help define rights and responsibilities within professional codes of conduct (as in the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki for medical ethics). In practice, it is often used interchangeably with the term 'moral' in public life to describe 'desirable' and 'undesirable' behaviour. AWERB members do not have to be experts in moral philosophy. The AWERB's focus is on practical, or applied ethics - exploring opinions and perspectives behind ethical problems and dilemmas to determine what, all things considered, should be done.

- **Behaving ethically involves more than just following the letter of the law.** Laws take time to create or amend and, in our rapidly changing world, some may not reflect current ethical values or thinking. Laws such as the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA) lay down certain baseline rules and boundaries, but within these there is room for judgement about what is, and is not, ethically acceptable. Complying with the ASPA is of course essential, but the AWERB also needs to encourage individuals, and the establishment, to reflect on what it means to behave ethically and aim to achieve this.

- **Societal views evolve over time, so activities that are considered acceptable today may not be so in the future. Discussion of current practices in a 'forum for ethical discussion' can help develop establishment policies on potentially controversial issues.** The AWERB itself can constitute a forum for discussion, but it could also establish additional discussion forums within the establishment for points of general and specific interest. All staff, not just those involved with animal use, should be encouraged to contribute. Further ideas on this aspect can be found in the RSPCA/LASA Guiding principles for AWERBs [1] and in the 'AWERB as a Forum for Discussion' document [2]. Some discussion topics are listed in the thought starter which accompanies this sheet.

- **The practical application of ethics provides a framework to help decide what it is 'right' to do when faced with dilemmas involving competing interests. The most obvious application of such a framework is the harm/benefit analysis that is central to drafting and reviewing a project licence.** This requires the harms and benefits of a project to be assessed and weighed as a means of deciding what is, and is not, acceptable to do to animals in a specific scientific context. This covers whether animals should be used and, if so, how. Research teams are urged to minimise harms and maximise benefits and to 'increase the separation' between the two. This is good practice, but it does not necessarily result in the identification and critical analysis of ethical issues, or any in-depth discussion of the rights and wrongs of using animals in a particular way and for a particular purpose. There may be wider ethical issues that should be considered. For example, is it always right to seek new medicines for conditions that can be treated using non-medical interventions such as social prescribing or social policy measures; do research groups liaise enough with clinicians and patient groups to check whether the outcomes of projects are wanted and needed? The answers to questions like these are important for animal and human welfare and the greater good, yet are rarely addressed.

- **Definition of what counts as an ethical issue can be unclear and therefore hard for people to identify, so there is a tendency to avoid the issue and only focus on the practical issues of animal welfare and the 3Rs.** People can feel unsure or uncomfortable about raising ethical concerns, either during project licence review or in other forums within the establishment. There may be a lack of time or enthusiasm (real or perceived) to tackle issues that do not appear directly relevant to current practices, or that would challenge the establishment's research interests or ways of doing things, for instance the use of new technologies, particular species or procedures that cause severe suffering. It is important to be aware of animal welfare, or the 3Rs, being described as 'ethics', and to point it out if terms are misused. Also, those closely involved with the project may not realise that there could be any debate about the justification for the research. They may interpret questions about ethics as being told they are 'unethical', which can inhibit constructive discussion, so care is needed to create an open, supportive environment for everyone.

- **Training to understand ethics, as it applies to the use of animals in science, should be provided for all AWERB members.** Members who are personal, or project, licensees, should have received ethics training, but other members should also have this opportunity. Guiding principles for good practice in delivering ethics training have been developed by the RSPCA and LASA [3].

- **A willingness to listen open-mindedly and try to understand the basis for different opinions, perspectives, beliefs and values is key to taking part in ethical discussions.** 'Doing ethics' helps reconcile disagreements and contributes to sound and consistent decision-making. It helps avoid being swayed by rhetoric (from any source) and makes sure that decisions and judgements take account of all relevant aspects of an issue. The AWERB Chair should ensure that there is a 'safe space' for open discussion around ethical issues, and that all voices are heard and duly respected.

- **Day to day decisions also have ethical aspects that require consideration and addressing these is integral to developing an establishment's Culture of Care.** Aside from ethical questions associated with project review, there will be other more general ethical questions to identify and consider from a 'local' perspective to help develop the establishment's Culture of Care. Examples include the emotional wellbeing of staff required to kill animals, or whether to use certain species or techniques, do particular types of work, or to keep levels of suffering below severe. For more examples see the RSPCA/LASA Guiding principles for AWERBs [1]. The thought starter that accompanies this sheet lists further examples of ethical issues that you can use in general discussions.

- **Ethical principles are an essential component of research integrity, with respect to research funding, conduct and publication.** The UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) provides more information on this, which can help put ethics into context and 'normalise' the need for ethical discussion [4]. Your establishment may be a signatory to the Concordat on Research Integrity, which should also be helpful.

- **Ultimately 'doing ethics' should make a difference! There should be outcomes, and impact - particularly for animals - associated with ethical review.** These could range from a decision that a technique, protocol or project should not be done; or an entire research field should not be pursued, through to everything being done as before, but more refined. Other outcomes between these two extremes could be in vivo scientists increasing liaison with clinicians, to better ensure their results will be of benefit; or a constructive discussion, in which everyone gets to understand one another better and establishment culture ('how we do things around here') is improved.

For examples of ethical issues - a thought starter, click here
For full list of references, click here