

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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UFAW

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