AAALAC International:
50 Years of Fostering Animal Welfare and Scientific Discovery

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of AAALAC International, a time for us to reflect on and celebrate our organization’s many achievements. And while the change and progress that has occurred over these five decades—within the fields of laboratory animal science and medicine as well as within our own organization—are truly remarkable, what’s also remarkable is the fact that many of the core values that served as the impetus for creating AAALAC remain part of the core values we embrace today.

This past year AAALAC worked diligently to develop a new strategic plan. As part of that process we spent a great deal of time thinking about the purpose of AAALAC, its mission, core competencies and values—and the value AAALAC International should be providing to the larger research community. What became apparent is that while so much has shifted and evolved, the mission of the organization remains largely unchanged: “to enhance the quality of research, testing and education by promoting humane and responsible research animal care and use through provision of advice and independent assessments to participating institutions and accreditation of those who meet or exceed applicable standards.”

In the 1940s, well before AAALAC’s inception, the field of laboratory animal research was quickly evolving. Back then it was the individual researchers who were solely responsible for the care of the animals. But during this era of growth the responsibility began to shift from the researchers to the institution. It was then that a small group of forward-thinking veterinarians from the Chicago area decided to come together to share information on the care of laboratory animals so that their institutions could become better stewards of the animals in their care. These pioneers included Nathan R. Brewer, D.V.M., Ph.D., University of Chicago; Elihu Bond, D.V.M., University of Illinois; Bennett J. Cohen, D.V.M., Ph.D., Northwestern University; Robert J. Flynn, D.V.M., Argonne National Laboratory; and Robert J. Schroeder, D.V.M., Hektoen Institute for Medical Research of Cook County Hospital. Eventually they founded a national organization known as the Animal Care Panel (ACP).

In 1950 the ACP began to meet annually, and by the end of the decade had taken the lead in developing standards for animal care and use. In 1960 the ACP created the Animal Facilities Certification Board (AFCB) to focus on determining professional standards for animal care programs with an eye toward eventually offering an accreditation program. Their work was greatly influenced by the publication of the first version of the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (the Guide) in 1963, then called the Guide for Laboratory Animal Facilities and Care. Today the current version of the Guide remains one of AAALAC’s Three Primary Standards used to evaluate programs around the world.

Soon the AFCB became the Animal Facilities Accreditation Board (AFAB) which formally proposed creating a voluntary accreditation program to help institutions achieve the highest standards for animal care and research. But before this program took flight, a National Advisory Committee was formed in 1964, comprised of representatives from large scientific and medical associations. This was a key factor in the future success of the accreditation program—bringing scientists and researchers to the table to make sure their interests were well represented—and an AAALAC International
value that remains steadfast today. “AAALAC” was finally established by the AFAB in 1965 with 14 Charter Member Organizations to guide its efforts.

In the years since, AAALAC International has accredited hundreds of institutions around the world and there are currently more than 900 accredited organizations. Today AAALAC is governed by 70 Member Organizations that currently make up the AAALAC International Board of Trustees and represent a global range of scientific and research interests. Over the years AAALAC’s Council on Accreditation—the experts who lead the site visits and peer review process that determine accreditation status—has grown from 12 to 59 people, now divided into five separate sections. These Council sections serve North America, Europe and the Pacific Rim, accommodating the continued steady increase in the number of institutions choosing to participate in the accreditation program.

And while growing participant numbers is certainly a clear measure of success, we know that AAALAC International has also played a key role in raising the benchmarks for the quality of research conducted using animals, and the well-being of the animals used in those studies. Few will dispute the fact that quality animal care yields more reliable data, and institutions participating in the accreditation program are achieving and maintaining full accreditation status at higher levels than ever before. Currently more than 90% of accredited organizations are sustaining their fully accredited status from site visit to site visit, a number that has increased from approximately 60% in the 1980s. This consistency directly benefits not just the animals, but the resulting science.

AAALAC International has also helped to harmonize global standards for animal care and use. Since its official designation as an international organization in 1996, AAALAC’s worldwide reach has steadily grown to include accredited organizations in 40 countries. Along the way AAALAC has had an opportunity to partner and participate in high-level discussions with government agencies and professional associations in many countries, offering the “AAALAC perspective” and collaborating to provide top-notch educational programs.

In the years ahead, AAALAC International will continue to change and evolve so that we can effectively support the rapid developments in science and research, and so that we can continue to fulfill our core purpose which remains rooted in values past and present: “To promote the welfare and responsible care and use of research animals worldwide.” Our aim is to do so with integrity, professionalism and collaboration. We will remain committed to a collegial approach with a global perspective, to excellence and consistency in the delivery of our accreditation program, and to a shared commitment to the value of peer review.

We thank all of you who, over the last 50 years, have contributed to this purpose—the thousands of employees at accredited organizations all over the world who are working for the advancement of science and excellence in the care and welfare of the animals that serve scientific discovery; and the hundreds of AAALAC International Council members, board members, staff and site visit team members who have made our mission possible. We enter the next 50 years with renewed vigor and sincere gratitude for your continued efforts. And while the road ahead will certainly offer abundant opportunities and challenges, we will stay grounded in our sustaining values, and work together to support science while continuing to raise the global benchmarks for animal care and well-being.

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