The role of veterinarians on animal ethics committees in New Zealand
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At the present time, 31 veterinarians nominated by the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) serve on the 36 animal ethics committees (AECs) that are in operation in New Zealand. A number of other veterinarians serve in other capacities, for example as welfare representatives, animal welfare officers or researchers.

Background
The use of animals in Research, Testing and Teaching (RTT) in New Zealand is governed by Part 6 the Animal Welfare Act 1999, a specific area of legislation that acknowledges that in the course of these activities, the welfare of animals may be deliberately compromised in ways that are unacceptable under non-RTT circumstances. Because of this, as well as public concern about the welfare of experimental animals, a system has been set in place that allows for a closer scrutiny than for any other uses of animals.

Under this system, any research, testing or teaching that involves the manipulation of an animal can only be done by an individual or institution that holds an approved code of ethical conduct (CEC) issued by the Director-General of Agriculture. Further, no project can be undertaken unless it has been approved by an AEC constituted under the CEC. Compliance with the CEC and the legislation by both the institution and its AEC is reviewed at a maximum of every five years.

Definitions under the Animal Welfare Act 1999
“Research, testing and teaching” includes:
- Any work (investigative, experimental, diagnostic, toxicity testing or potency testing) that involves the manipulation of any animal; or
- Any work involving the manipulation of any animal to produce antisera or other biological products; or
- Any teaching that involves the manipulation of any animal.

“Animal” includes:
- Mammals
- Birds
- Reptiles
- Amphibians
- Fish
- Octopus, squid, crab, lobster, crayfish
- Mammalian, avian or reptilian pre-hatched young in the last half of gestation or development, and marsupial pouch young.

“Manipulation” means:
- Interfering with the normal physiological, behavioural, or anatomical integrity of an animal
- Subjecting it to a procedure which is unusual or abnormal when compared with that to which animals of that type would be subjected under normal management or practice
- Depriving an animal of usual care
- Exposing the animal to any parasite, micro-organism, drug, chemical, biological product, radiation, electrical stimulation, or environmental condition; or
- Enforced activity, restraint, nutrition, or surgical intervention.
“Manipulation” does not include:
- Any therapy or prophylaxis necessary or desirable for the welfare of the animal
- The killing of an animal as the end point of research, testing or teaching
- The hunting or killing of any animal in a wild state by a method that is not an experimental method.

**Animal ethics committees**
The holder of a code of ethical conduct must form an AEC, whose membership must include:
- A minimum of 4 members
- A minimum 3 external members including:
  - An NZVA nominee
  - An approved animal welfare organisation nominee
  - A territorial authority or regional council nominee.

The functions of the AEC as set down in the legislation are:
- considering and making decisions on project applications including renewals, suspensions and revocations;
- setting conditions on project approvals;
- monitoring compliance; and
- monitoring animal management and facilities.

When making its decisions on particular projects, the AEC is required to consider the following:
- The scientific or educational objectives;
- The likely harm and distress to the animal/s and its potential alleviation;
- A cost-benefit analysis between the first two considerations;
- Whether the experimental design allows the objectives to be met;
- Whether the choice of species is appropriate;
- Whether the number of animals has been appropriately justified;
- What measures will be taken to ensure general health and well-being;
- Whether the personnel involved in manipulations are suitably qualified;
- Whether the project duplicates previous work, and if so, is the duplication justified;
- Whether the work involves repeated use of animals, and if so is this justified and managed appropriately; and
- Whether there is a commitment to use, promote or publish the results.

**Role of the NZVA nominee**
Veterinarians appointed to AECs following nomination by the NZVA take part in all aspects of AEC functioning. However, their combination of skills places them in a unique position within the AEC.

Firstly, they are independent of the institution or individual whose use of animals is under scrutiny, and are often the only independent, scientifically-trained professional on the committee. As such, they are an informed representative of the public – someone who is seen as having a professional commitment to promoting and nurturing the welfare of animals, who sees animals as sentient creatures and who knows about the recognition and alleviation of pain. Given that they are there partly to help satisfy the community's concern about the responsible and humane use of animals, they clearly need to know and respect
the community’s variety of views on animal welfare. However, as professionals who act under a code of professional conduct, veterinarians are certainly seen as being ethically concerned about animals.

The veterinarian can bring a particular dimension to the discussion of scientific issues and is willing to ask questions about the merit and methodology of the scientific research or teaching. With an education in the biological and applied medical sciences, the veterinarian should be able to judge the appropriateness of the science in terms of its potential benefits when measured against the cost to the animals. As such, veterinarians can make a unique contribution to discussion on the “3Rs” (reduction, replacement and refinement) which are the cornerstone of the ethical use of animals in this way, as well as contributing to the rational debate on animal experimentation issues.

Although possibly not trained specifically in the health and welfare of laboratory animal species, the veterinarian has to understand a wide range of species in his/her daily work, and is able to assess the physical environment and physical fitness of animals and to determine the need for intervention or euthanasia.

**AECs in New Zealand**
The work of NZVA nominees varies widely depending on the type of AEC on which they serve. The institutions holding CECs range from those doing research for the agricultural sector, those doing medical research, and those doing conservation research to educational institutes teaching such subjects as animal handling, and companies researching both veterinary and medical drugs. Testing of human and animal vaccines, as well as testing for toxins such as marine biotoxins are also carried out under animal ethics approvals.

**Surveys of NZVA nominees on AECs**
The NZVA has conducted two surveys of its AEC nominees in recent years in an attempt to be able to better represent them. The first, covering all NZVA nominees, was carried out in 2002 when the possibility of AEC members’ names being released to the public arose. Of the then 34 NZVA nominees contacted, 20 (59%) said they would seriously consider resigning if their names were to be made public, with a further four (12%) saying that although they would expect problems, they felt the work was too important for them to consider resignation.

Of the 10 (29%) who said the name release would not present a problem for them, nine were sitting on committees that deal with research or teaching at the lower end of the scale in terms of animal welfare cost, with some acknowledging the unlikelihood of their being targeted. The tenth had yet to attend his first meeting so was not yet aware of the level of welfare cost.

The second survey looked at a number of issues in part as an acknowledgement that the above-mentioned range of RTT work done in New Zealand means that, within an already small group of veterinarians involved in this work, there may be little to compare from one AEC to another, and so little cohesion amongst the group. Indeed one of the main issues mentioned when suggestions for how NZVA could help centred around the difficulties of isolation, with possible solutions including having a slot at the NZVA Conference.

This survey, conducted last year, demonstrated the value that these veterinarians place on AEC work, and provided some interesting insights into how they view their contribution as AEC members. Of the 19 out of 31 responses (63%), every respondent felt personally satisfied that he/she was able to promote animal welfare and achieve a better quality of life for animals in research, testing and teaching, a result that reflects the value of NZVA nominees on AECs.
Citing particularly their role as often the only independent, scientifically-trained professional on the committee, respondents’ comments included:

- I believe my role in the AEC is crucial to its success.
- There is a feeling/expectation that the NZVA rep is the final arbiter on animal welfare.

As well as the following which relate to the role of AECs in general:

- I feel the input of the AEC has made a big difference in improving the quality of life for the animals.
- No protocols are passed until we are completely satisfied the three Rs have been fulfilled.
- I believe that ethically AECs provide an excellent control against the exploitation of animals
- There is good evidence that our presence contribute markedly to good planning and execution of experiments, including experimental design.

It was interesting to note that over half of the respondents (64%) had served on their AEC for seven years or more, and a majority (61%) did not favour setting a finite term for NZVA nominees on AECs. Of those who did think the term should be finite, around half qualified this with the possibility of renomination, while most thought that around 5 years was appropriate length of term. The question about length of term is one that has arisen from time to time, creating a dilemma for those nominating members to AECs as to where to draw the line between retaining experience and introducing fresh perspectives. It seems from the survey that the majority of NZVA nominees regard experience as having more value.

Review system

An additional role for veterinarians within the AEC system is as reviewers of CECs and AECs. As part of an ongoing process of ensuring the adequacy of the system, every institution or individual using animals in RTT must undergo a review at least every five years – more often if the CEC and AEC are newly constituted, or if required by the Director-General. At present, seven out of eight reviewers of CECs and AECs are veterinarians.