

“Safeguards and Service – Striking the Right Balance”

Questions and Answers

- 1) I am a veterinarian and I'm also part of an ACC for the past 2 years. In the webinar, you mention reducing pain and distress. I know the aim is to minimize pain and distress, but there is a gray area that must be addressed between trying a treatment to save an individual animal for a project or euthanize it to prevent any unnecessary suffering... Establishing a hierarchy of acceptable suffering is not always easy and even less when there are veterinarians, researchers, technicians, trainees and other people involved around the same animal. I know that the final decision is mine but my question is:

Do we stick to the “common sense rule” or will there be in the near future a pain rating scale (tolerable suffering) taking into account its duration adapted to each specific animal species?

Answer:

One of the main responsibilities of the Institutional Animal Care Committee (ACC), and therefore of the veterinarian serving on that committee, is to ensure that all *reasonable* precautions are taken to reduce pain and distress of animals used in the facility. Of course, we understand that it is impossible to eliminate completely and in all cases a certain level of pain or distress. There will always be cases where you have to make decisions based on sound judgment and experience of those involved: the veterinarians of course but also the principal investigator, the research team and animal care staff. What can we do to facilitate the decision making process? The main tool that can help in that regard is the inclusion, in the research protocol approved by the ACC, of the most specific and well-defined endpoints possible, determined by the investigator and approved by the ACC and the veterinarian. When beginning new studies, it is always possible and often useful to conduct a pilot study that can be used for purposes such as to establish appropriate endpoints using a small number of animals.

In cases where clinical signs of varying severity are expected in animals that are part of the study, endpoints should be established based on possible clinical signs and the acceptable degree of severity of those signs, taking into account all the available data on the animal model and the purpose of the study. If no particular clinical signs in animals are expected (e.g. a study of animal feed), endpoints should be generic and therefore apply in most cases while still well defined. For example, what should be done if an animal develops a condition requiring special care, which is however not related to the ongoing study (e.g. intestinal obstruction, fracture, caesarean section)? Is there a limit to the amount of money to be spent on foreseen proposed treatments? When dealing with farm animals, should the herd be managed as a business? These questions are important and should be discussed beforehand. Obviously, it is impossible to foresee and decide everything in advance. The veterinarian diagnosis and prognosis will greatly influence the final decision. Nevertheless, certain principles can certainly be predetermined.

Some closing remarks. You are quite right in stating that the final decision must rest with the clinical veterinarian. This is why the CCAC insists that this person has no ties with researchers or the research projects and why a research veterinarian should not be ultimately responsible for animal health on his or her own research projects.

Regarding a “scale for pain or acceptable suffering”, we have no specific measurements; however, you can find information to help you build your own scale or checklist in the CCAC guidelines on choosing endpoints (http://www.ccac.ca/Documents/Standards/Guidelines/Appropriate_endpoint.pdf), particularly in Section 9 and in Appendix C.

The anticipated duration of the pain, whether or not it is possible to control it, its impact on the validity of research results, the initial goal of the research as accepted by the ACC, the institutional culture and the degree of tolerance of institutional and ACC members with regards to animal suffering will influence the decision of the veterinarian and the research team (decision which will ideally be made with the agreement of all). And that's fine! In closing, a reminder that the reaching of endpoints in an animal or a group of animals does not necessarily mean they must be euthanized. For example, it is possible to simply withdraw the animals from the study, treat their condition, temporarily suspend their participation in the study, or modify the research protocol to lessen the adverse effects. The appropriate action once endpoints have been reached should also be included in the description of endpoints in the original protocol.

2) How do you balance regulations and compliance during a time of fiscal constraints?

Answer:

It depends on what types of “regulations” we are talking about. Legal regulations (those established by municipal, provincial, or federal governments) are usually not very flexible, no matter what state of fiscal constraints you may be in. You simply have to abide by them.

If we are talking about local or institutional guidelines and policies, there is normally some degree of flexibility based on an understanding of the conditions under which one must operate. These would need to be discussed with the proper authorities (e.g. senior administration, local ACC), through good communication lines, and constructive discussions, balancing policy with practical considerations.

Regarding CCAC guidelines and policy statements, there is some built-in flexibility with respect to adapting them to local conditions and environment. But some fundamental principles are non-negotiable, including the fact that lack of funds is not an acceptable justification to not take proper care of animals and that the ACC must remain active and functional, with the senior administration's support. The volume and types of animal-based work should not exceed the resources available to the institution.

The CCAC is a peer driven organization, at all levels. CCAC's guidelines and policy statements are written, approved and implemented by peers of the animal use and care community. CCAC recommendations and institutional responses to them are reviewed and approved by peers from assessment panels and from the CCAC Assessment and Certification Committee. These peers are well aware of the difficulties faced by institutions and the animal use and care community, and they work in each case to balance reasonable services to and safeguards for animals with practicalities and financial constraints.

3) The CCAC provides valuable assessments to institutions, but can the focus be shifted more to animal welfare and best practices, rather than reviewing management of operations, human resources or reporting structures, especially in well-established programs that function well?

Answer:

There are several layers of responsibility for animal welfare in science within the Canadian system. The welfare of individual animals on a day-to-day basis is the institution's responsibility (with several layers of responsibility within the institution). The CCAC's responsibility is to assess whether an institution that wishes to become or remain certified has the structure and resources necessary to protect animal welfare at all times.

Animal welfare in science depends on and is directly affected by the actions of persons at many different levels, and by the structure of institutional animal care and use programs, it is not something that can be assessed in isolation. Animal welfare depends on, among other elements:

- what projects animals will be used for, and whether those projects have been found to have (scientific or pedagogical) merit (senior administration)
- whether there is an effective and appropriately constituted ACC in place that approves each project before it begins and follows up on projects in practice
- who will be using the animals and whether they are trained and competent
- whether there are appropriate veterinary services
- whether there are sufficient, qualified personnel to care for the animals and manage the facilities with sufficient resources and without conflicts of interest, as supported by the senior administration
- whether the equipment and facilities to be used are appropriate

The CCAC works by evaluating how an animal care and use program is structured, whether there are sufficient human, physical and financial resources for the types of work, and whether the program can be well run with as few conflicts of interest as possible.

During each CCAC visit, assessment panels discuss with institutions how animal welfare can be optimized given the nature of the institution's work, the structure of its program and its resources, and we will continue to work on communicating how good animal welfare on an ongoing basis depends on each component of the institutional program working successfully.

- 4) Large institutions today have well established diligent health and safety programs, particularly in universities. Training in health and safety is paramount, audits are frequent, follow-up is consistent and due diligence of supervisors is a strict requirement. In those cases, would it not be more informative to the CCAC to review these existing health and safety programs and training rather than making recommendations to change operational procedures at the facility level related to safety based on a one time glimpse at a facility's operation during an assessment visit?

Answer:

Before an assessment visit, every institution has to fill out and send to assessment panel members a Program Review Form (PRF) that describes the entire animal care and use program. Section 5 of the PRF specifically asks for a description of the institution's occupational health and safety measures related to animal care and use. The panel members therefore have an understanding of health and safety measures in place at the institution from the institution itself to begin with. The panel members then discuss these measures with those responsible for health and safety, with animal caregivers and users, and with the ACC, and also look at how the program is being applied in practice in animal facilities.

The problems encountered by CCAC panels with respect to occupational health and safety programs generally fall into one of the following categories:

- institutions that have general health and safety programs, but where risk management specific to working with animals is not well covered, or is not entirely well covered for all categories of work with animals

- institutions that have good theoretical safety measures for those working with animals, but the panel has evidence of these measures being ignored in practice

Where a CCAC panel has clear evidence of several institutional members not applying normal measures to protect themselves from animal-based risks, the panel:

- checks and discusses institutional occupational health and safety measures, and makes a recommendation if these measures are deficient when compared with CCAC guidance
- if the institution has appropriate safety measures in place in theory, the panel discusses with institutional members why these measures are not being applied in practice, whether training is complete, audits are being performed, follow-ups done, whether individuals are knowingly choosing to not protect themselves, etc. and then works on whether to include suggestions in the assessment report or recommendations based on CCAC guidance.