CCAC Policy on the Importance of Independent Peer Review of the Scientific Merit of Animal-Based Research Projects

The Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) holds as one of its most basic tenets that animal use for research, teaching and testing be undertaken only after a careful examination of the potential value of this use. Several CCAC documents emphasize that merit must be demonstrated before animal use can be approved.

1. General

The October 1989 CCAC policy statement on: ethics of animal investigation (Appendix XV-A, CCAC Guide to the Care and Use of Experimental Animals, Vol. 1, 2nd Edn., 1993) states:

a) "The use of animals in research, teaching, and testing is acceptable only if it promises to contribute to understanding of fundamental biological principles, or to the development of knowledge that can reasonably be expected to benefit humans or animals..." (opening statement).

b) "Expert opinion must attest to the potential value of studies with animals" (point 3).

2. Research

In particular, for all animal-based research projects, institutional animal care committees (ACCs) must ensure that scientific merit has been demonstrated through an independent peer review before the corresponding protocols are given final approval by the committee. Several CCAC documents attest to this:

a) "It is the responsibility of the ACC to: ... d) ensure that, for research projects, a peer review of scientific merit is carried out; if the review is not carried out by an external, peer review agency, the ACC should require that it be obtained according to the 1997 CCAC guidelines on: animal use protocol review" (Section 3, CCAC Terms of Reference for Animal Care Committees, March 2000).

b) "Information provided within the protocol review form should provide the ACC with a clear sense of the need for the experimental project, and of the relationship between the proposed experiment and the overall objective. ACCs must ensure that all approved proposals have been peer reviewed for scientific merit. Proposals associated with competitive funding applications to agencies with adequate peer review processes generally do not require review for scientific merit by the ACC. The requirement for scientific merit should normally be satisfied if the application is funded. Where ACC approval is required by the funding agency before it will review the application, ACC approval should be provisional, pending assurance from the funding agency that the application has high scientific merit. Projects approved and funded by some agencies or organizations, or from internal
funds may have been subjected to little or no peer review. Some funding agencies award "Program Grants" which, unlike their "Project Grants", may include animal use that is not subjected to a focussed peer review for scientific merit" (CCAC guidelines on: animal use protocol review, 1997).

3. Process

Where evidence of good peer review is absent, the institutional ACC must proceed as follows:

"...the ACC should solicit two reviews of the objectives, hypotheses, methods and contributions of the project by knowledgeable scientists who do not collaborate with the investigator. As a minimum, one referee must be external to the committee. The reviews must be documented and must contain sufficient information to support the reviewers' conclusion(s)" (CCAC guidelines on: animal use protocol review, 1997).

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