

The Ethics of Animal Research: A UK Perspective

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Abstract

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, an independent body in the United Kingdom, has published a 2005 report titled *The Ethics of Research Involving Animals*. The Report, produced by a Working Party that represented a wide range of views, seeks to clarify the debate that surrounds this topic and aims to help people identify and analyze the relevant scientific and ethical issues. The Working Party considered the arguments surrounding whether animal research yields useful results, and recommends that its predictability and transferability should be evaluated more fully, particularly in controversial areas. Commonly encountered ethical questions and arguments were considered in order to understand what lies behind disagreement on the moral justification of animal research. Four possible ethical positions on animal research, which represent points on a continuum, are described. Despite the range of views that exist among members of the Working Party, the Report presents a "Consensus Statement" that identifies agreement on several important issues. Building on this statement, recommendations are made for improving the quality of the debate and promoting the 3Rs (refinement, reduction, and replacement).

tion. Similarly, while controversy about animal research has existed in the United States for several decades, a recent increase in violent and threatening behavior by animal rights activists has heightened attention on the issue. In both countries, too often the debate on animal research is portrayed in a polarized manner, differentiating only between those "for" and those "against" all animal research. However, a closer examination reveals a more complex picture: people have very different views on particular kinds of research depending on the aims, type, and location of research, the species of animal used, and the degree of suffering experienced in the different contexts.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is an independent body in the United Kingdom that examines ethical issues raised by new developments in biology and medicine. The Council has published a Report *The Ethics of Research Involving Animals*, which seeks to clarify the debate and aims to help people analyze the scientific and ethical issues. The Report is the outcome of 2 years of deliberations by a Working Party that I chaired, composed of academic and industry scientists, philosophers, members of animal protection groups, and one lawyer.¹ To inform their discus-

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¹See the Council's website (www.nuffieldbioethics.org) for additional information.

Introduction

Research involving animals has been the subject of intense debate in the United Kingdom, the rest of Europe and the United States. The tactics employed by organizations campaigning to end animal experimentation, peaceful or otherwise, regularly feature in the British media. More recently, scientists have become more active in their defense of animal research by organizing protest marches and petitions, which have received significant media atten-

²The members of the Working Party include the following: Baroness Perry of Southwark (Chairman), House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee and Pro-Chancellor of the University of Surrey; Professor Kenneth Boyd, Professor of Medical Ethics, University of Edinburgh; Professor Allan Bradley FRS, Director, The Wellcome Trust Sanger Centre, Cambridge; Professor Steve Brown, Director, MRC Mammalian Genetics Unit, MRC Mouse Genome Centre, Medical Research Council, Harwell; Professor Grahame Bulfield, Vice-Principal and Head of College of Sci-

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sions, the Working Party sought advice from a wide range of experts and held a public consultation for 3 months.

UK regulation on animal research is often cited as the strictest in the world. The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986³ requires researchers to obtain several types of licenses from the government before any animal can be used in harmful procedures. Before a license is granted, researchers must carry out a “cost-benefit assessment” to ascertain whether the likely benefits of the research (e.g., in terms of knowledge gained) outweigh the costs to the animals (possible pain, suffering, or distress). Government inspectors ascertain that research facilities are adhering to regulations

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- What effect will there be on the animals used in the experiment?
- Are there any alternatives?

After considering these questions, members of the Working Party could not agree on a single ethical position that reflects the range of views that exists in society. Instead, it presented an outline of the following four possible ethical positions, which represent points on a continuum:

1. Valuable animal research requires no further ethical justification (no member of the Working Party took this position).
2. Animal research is morally acceptable if the costs (e.g., the pain and suffering experienced by the animal) are outweighed by the benefits (e.g., the knowledge gained from the research), but every reasonable step must be taken to reduce the costs to animals.
3. Animal research poses a moral dilemma. Whatever you decide, you will act wrongly, either by neglecting human health and welfare or by harming animals.
4. There is no moral justification for any harmful research on animals that is not to their benefit.

Can We Ever Agree on Research Involving Animals?

Despite the wide range of views that exists among members of the Working Party, the Report presents a “Consensus Statement” that identifies agreement on several important issues. For example, members of the Working Party agreed that historically, animals have been used in a wide range of scientific research activities that have provided many benefits to society. They also agreed that a world in which the important benefits of such research could be achieved without causing pain and suffering to animals must be the ultimate goal.

All members of the Working Party acknowledged that as in other areas of ethically contentious issues such as abortion or euthanasia, any society needs to settle on a single policy for practical purposes. Steps therefore need to be taken to reduce as far as possible existing disagreement, and the Working Party sought to make unambiguous recommendations in specific areas in order to accomplish this task.¹⁰ The recommendations focus on promoting the 3Rs and improving the quality of the debate, and are outlined in more detail below.

The Working Party concluded that the concept of the 3Rs and the hybrid moral position (some absolute limits, some weighing of the costs and benefits) could be accepted, or at least tolerated, by most members of society. By fine tuning the approach to animal research—relaxing some restrictions and introducing others—more people may be able to endorse the regulations than has been the case so far. Not everyone will be able to fully support the 3Rs and the hybrid

alternatives. To improve the application of the 3Rs, the Working Party made a number of recommendations, including the following:

- A thorough analysis of the scientific barriers to replacements should be undertaken by the relevant government department.
- Scientific publications should include more information on how the 3Rs have been applied in the work described.
- Funding bodies should support applications for research that aims to find solutions for implementing the 3Rs in challenging areas.
- Harmonization of test guidelines, so that a single study design is acceptable to regulatory authorities in many countries, is a very valuable way of reducing the use of animals in safety testing. The United Kingdom should make it a priority to identify areas in which harmonization is difficult.
- The government and the scientific community should engage more in a systematic and visible (to ensure accountability) search for methods involving the 3Rs in toxicology.

Many varied opinions were expressed throughout the course of the Working Party. A respect for beliefs different

from one's own enabled members of the group to agree on the Consensus Statement and to present recommendations, in particular in relation to the 3Rs and to improving the quality of the debate. While it was not possible to attribute to all members of the group the recommendations presented on any one issue, all members do accept that the recommendations are valid contributions to the debate. Members believe that this approach should contribute to fair and balanced discussions among individuals and should aid decision making by those in government or other official and regulatory bodies, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. In particular, it is crucial to avoid polarization of the debate if the true complexity of the issues is to be acknowledged and if the debate is to move forward.

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