

Animal Welfare: The Business Case for Compassion



As modern animal researchers, we all understand that the welfare of the animals we are privileged to work with has a direct impact on their physical and mental health. Likewise, ensuring animals are healthy and content means that the studies we perform are of the highest possible quality and involve the smallest number of subjects. Only the most egregiously backward scientist would fail to adopt this basic tenet.

But ensuring animal welfare in science, particularly in those studies that are destined for public scrutiny, is important for other, business-related reasons, as well.

Sponsors Demand Animal Welfare

Many sponsors now conduct animal welfare audits prior to placing work externally. Their reasons for this are not entirely altruistic; publicly traded companies answer to their shareholders. How these companies conduct animal research is part of their commitment to social responsibility and they can be held to account by activist elements within their shareholders. On a more personal level, many of the sponsor representatives who place preclinical or animal health laboratory studies are veterinarians or animal researchers in their own right. They look for places that they are proud to work with.

As researchers, we believe our studies are conducted with the utmost attention to confidentiality and security. Nevertheless, we are only one social media posting away from a public relations nightmare and an awkward conversation with a sponsor representative who has been directed to pull their studies. Even legitimate research publications and regulatory freedom of information summaries can lay bare less than ideal research practices and poorly designed studies. So, like Caesar's wife, we must comport ourselves with the utmost integrity. Maintaining strict standards for animal welfare is key to our ability to engage with the public, and defend the importance of our work while satisfying our sponsors that our animal care standards are exemplary.

We have to challenge ourselves to treat our animals in a manner that passes the "red face test". In other words, if a lay person were to walk into the middle of a procedure, how would they react? Would they feel confident that the animals were being handled humanely and professionally by caring people, or would they be disquieted by what they saw? We need to make sure that the highest standards of animal care are applied in our studies. We need to ensure that veterinarians and veterinary technicians are performing procedures commensurate with their training and experience. Finally, we need to make certain that our equipment is modern and our drugs and materials are appropriate and well-selected.

A Strong and Engaged Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) is an Asset to Quality Research

The business model of a contract research organisation (CRO) demands that study work be ongoing and that colony animals are used effectively. Empty cages and surplus animals quickly (and literally!) eat up the massive overhead that CROs carry. The management of a CRO is motivated to keep studies moving through the system with attention to the bottom line. At times, this can come into conflict with good science and animal welfare. The IACUC represents an effective check against this.



The IACUC should be sufficiently empowered to allow free and open discourse on issues of animal welfare. They should not be just another rubber stamp. While organisations like the American Association for the Advancement of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) and the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) have basic membership recommendations for the IACUC, consideration should be given to exceeding these. Soliciting input from additional community members, veterinarians, and technicians with different points of view can be beneficial. Debate should be lively and consensus should be solid. The IACUC is the moral centre of the animal research facility. They have the power to request changes and even stop studies. Interestingly, they can be an excellent ally of the study director and investigator in helping them stand up to a sponsor who is over-reaching on a project. Furthermore, they should never allow money, or lack of it, to be the reason for taking a short cut if there is any possibility that the welfare of the animal will be in jeopardy.

Better Animal Welfare Increases Colony Value and Longevity and Enhances Adoption Rates

Laboratory animal research models can be difficult to develop and expensive to maintain. Instrumented animals, expensive and hard to maintain species, and genetically modified strains can all require specialised housing and care. Retaining them for a useful lifespan requires that they be maintained with the utmost care. Prematurely terminating these animals due to preventable disease or behavioural issues is a waste of resource.

Facilities with adoption policies will want to ensure that candidates are physically and behaviourally pristine. Adoption allows the adoptee, their family and their social network a surrogate glimpse at the quality of life the animal has received in a research setting. The aim for such a programme is to “adopt out” surplus animals, not to have the public thinking they have “rescued” their pet from a life of misery. Adoption of quality animals can be an excellent public relations strategy for an animal research laboratory, but only if there is due regard for welfare.

Attention to Animal Welfare Attracts and Retains Quality Staff

Caring and committed staff are the bedrock upon which quality studies are conducted. Attracting and retaining these people is vitally important. In a modern animal research facility there is considerable training and up-front investment required before these people can be effective team members. Finding top-notch animal care attendants, veterinary technicians, and veterinarians is the start. Allowing them to develop by providing the resources for training, continuing education and a supportive environment that hears and respects their opinions is critical. These people chose their respective fields because of a calling to do right by animals. They want to be proud of the work that they do. Unless we pay attention to that fundamental basis of their career choice, they will no doubt seek employment elsewhere and all the time and resource spent training and developing them will be wasted.

Signs of their commitment are generally obvious: the animals get named and staff can identify them by their individual behaviours; people’s duties are quietly shuffled on post-mortem days; staff keep pictures of their “favourite” animals; adoption boards spring up in the lunchroom. There’s obviously a fine line between callous disrespect (the animal is just a “data point”) and having too much emotional investment in our subjects. But a healthy attitude is one that recognises the importance of the work that is done and the fact that, while these animals are with us, they will receive the best care possible in a manner consistent with their physical, emotional, and behavioural needs.

This compassion is a good thing because it begets animal welfare, environmental enrichment, and early identification of physical and behavioural issues. Staff who are invested in the wellbeing of their charges will also resent practices that are less than ideal. Occasionally, investigators, juggling tight budgets, even tighter timelines and pressure from upper management, will have “scope creep” in studies with ever more procedures piled on. Animal care staff that recognise when too much is being asked of their charges, and are not afraid to speak up in their defence, are an important asset in maintaining a high standard of animal welfare and ensuring quality science.

Conclusion

There is a case to be made that attention to animal welfare is a business imperative for research labs and CROs:

- Ensuring research passes the “red face test” gives sponsors peace of mind that their studies will pass public scrutiny;
- A commitment to compassion ensures the best possible public image of an endeavour that evokes an emotional response in many people;
- A corporate commitment to animal welfare and a strong IACUC provide credibility during study design;
- Quality staff with a strong knowledge of colony animals results in healthy animals with a longer useful lifespan that may have adoption as their eventual end goal;
- An environment of compassion enhances job satisfaction for those with direct contact with animals, making attracting and retaining quality employees easier.

To ignore or merely pay lip service to animal welfare in the 21st century is bad business.



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