



Openness and Public Accountability – The Why, Who, What and How of It

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Summary

In recent years, a number of expert reviews have concluded that it is desirable for better information to be available to the public about the type of research undertaken using animals and the intended benefits, along with the number and species of animals used and the implications in terms of pain, suffering and, distress for the animals involved. However, there is no single “public,” and “openness” can mean different things to different people. In addition, information alone does not necessarily equal openness. This paper considers what is meant by openness, who has responsibilities and interests in this regard, and how it may be better achieved.

Keywords: openness, transparency, public, accountability, ethics

1 What is openness?

Numerous attempts have been made to define the concept of openness. For the purposes of this paper it will be summarized as a willingness to communicate meaningful information to others in a spirit of trust in the hope that such openness will bring mutual benefit. In this instance, it is argued that improved openness also can lead to benefits for animals, as third parties.

Being open involves communicating with one or more different “publics,” sometimes referred to as “target audiences” or “interested parties.” It is important to bear in mind that each of these groups may require different levels of engagement or information.

2 The need for openness – why?

“Research (using animals) has become a topic of growing public debate in recent years, and that is a good thing, because there are significant ethical considerations involved.” (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, et al., 2008)

Openness in scientific research involving animals is widely considered to be both desirable and necessary. It also is becoming ever more relevant as ethical discussions take place across a range of countries and cultures regarding the impact of humans and their activities on animals – and the acceptability of these interactions.

To help illustrate why openness is important, it is necessary to consider the perspectives of those often referred to in this regard as the “public” or “interested parties” Note, however, that some individuals may be part of more than one group:

- Those for whom research is said to be done “in their name”
“Animal research and testing has played a part in almost every medical breakthrough of the last century. It has saved hundreds of millions of lives worldwide, and is vital to our National Health Service.” (Joan Ryan MP, UK Government Minister, quoted in Anon, 2006)

A variety of statements and claims are routinely made as to the importance of animal experiments. Those who use, or promote the use of animals say that animal research is necessary to advance human understanding of how the human body works and to help make sense of the world around us. Experiments also are said to be undertaken with the aim of improving the health of humans and that of our animals (e.g., those on farms and our pets), and that they contribute to the protection of the environment in which we live. When something is said to be done in someone’s name or best interests, they have a right to understand its implications and to comment on the extent to which they approve of it.

- Those whose money directly or indirectly funds animal use
Public money funds research through the distribution of general taxation by governments to a variety of science funding bodies¹. The percentage of research grants ultimately funded that involves animal use may vary considerably, but with large sums at stake, even comparatively small percentages may represent significant expenditure.

Animal experiments also are funded as a result of public donations to biomedical research charities^{2,3}. If these organizations award grants for research that involves the use of animals, it is important that they are open and honest about this. It is possible that providing such information may have implications

¹ e.g., www.mrc.ac.uk/About/Factsfigures/index.htm

² e.g., <http://aboutus.cancerresearchuk.org/how-we-fundraise/how-much-we-raise/>

³ e.g., www.bhf.org.uk/research/our-research-spending.aspx



for the willingness of people to donate further⁴, but donors must be able to make fully informed decisions on how they would like their money used.

- Those with specific concerns for animals and their welfare

While opinion polls show that most people think some animal use may be justified, they usually set limits or conditions on the level of animal suffering involved, the exact purpose of the experiments, and the use of particular species (e.g., Intomart, 2004). In addition, a significant number routinely state that they do not support the use of animals in *any* experimentation because of the importance they place on animal welfare⁵.

People expect a robust and transparent system of controls to regulate animal experiments and want to have confidence in the process of licensing such animal use. Public concerns identified by the UK Animal Procedures Committee (2001) include: unjustified work might be authorized; animals may not be housed in conditions that respect their nature; efforts to ensure that the procedures involve the minimum of suffering may not be sufficient; compliance with licensing conditions is not adequately enforced; breaches are not viewed seriously by the authorities; and no effective mechanism exists to ensure that the potential benefits derived from the harm inflicted are actually realized.

In another example, 68% of respondents in a UK poll agreed with the statement, “*I wouldn’t be surprised if some animal experiments go on behind closed doors without an official licence,*”, 61% agreed that “*I feel that unnecessary duplication of animal experiments may go on,*”, and 29% agreed that “*I have a lack of trust in the regulatory system about animal experimentation.*” (IPSOS Mori, 2011)

With these sorts of concerns, public engagement on this issue clearly is important. The UK House of Lords Select Committee on Animals in Scientific Procedures (2002) notes that “*the availability to the public of regularly updated, good quality information on what animal experiments are done and why is vital to create an atmosphere in which the issue of animal experimentation can be discussed productively.*” This also would help to move the public debate away from a focus that too often spotlights the views of those at either end of the spectrum or that is based on information that is limited or erroneous.

- Those with an interest in the activities of businesses

“*Companies should be accountable not only for their financial performance, but also for the impact of their activities on society and the environment.*” Confederation of British Industry, 2011⁶

Ethics and openness, and a company’s acknowledgement of its own place in wider society, are becoming increasingly im-

portant aspects of business. A growing number of companies are implementing policies, producing reports, and even devoting whole departments to ensuring that the company has effective and worthy corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and strategies (RSPCA, 2010). For many companies it would be highly appropriate, and expected, for them to be open about and to consider their own impacts on and responsibilities towards animals.

This allows potential consumers and investors to make fully informed purchasing or investment decisions. Furthermore, it helps consumers to recognize and to put in context how their own wants, actions, or desires may actually create a demand for animal testing; for example, their expectation of a “pill for every ill,” or demands for new and improved household or garden chemical products.

- Those trying to make practical improvements for advancing animal welfare

“*Progress on the 3Rs can be made more effectively if there is good communication between all those in the debate on animal experiments.*” (Professor Colin Blakemore, 2002)

Where good information is made widely available there are clear opportunities for all those involved, including those using and caring for animals, as well as regulators, to:

- identify areas of particular concern to help focus resources, e.g., by promoting increased funding directed into the development of humane alternatives in that area or the promotion of refinement of experimental procedures or housing⁷;
- further stimulate opportunities to spread best practice and knowledge⁸;
- help avoid unnecessary duplication of studies and the chances of researchers repeating experimental procedures that others have found not to work but have not communicated this.

3 What information should be made available?

For interested parties to contribute constructively to discussions and decisions on the use of animals, they need to be able to understand the harms and perceived benefits of research (i.e., what is done to animals and why) and be able to consider these in relation to their own individual viewpoints and concerns. They also need to know how existing regulatory controls on animal use work, and how animal welfare concerns and issues such as humane alternatives to animals are taken into account. To do this they must have accurate and understandable information in an easily accessible form.

⁴ In answer to the question “Would you knowingly donate to a medical research or health charity that funds experiments on animals or not?” 82% of respondents answered “No”, 16% answered “Yes”, and 2% said “Don’t know” (GfK NOP Poll carried out on behalf of Animal Aid (2011)).

⁵ In a UK poll undertaken by IPSOS Mori in 2011, 30% agreed with this statement.

⁶ What is Corporate Social Responsibility? <http://www.cbi.org.uk/business-issues/corporate-governance/>

⁷ For example, the UK government stated that making information available on the number of laboratory animals used in the production and regulatory testing of vaccines ... “*is necessary if government is to focus attention on priority areas for the development of alternatives to animal testing and to encourage a reduction in the use of laboratory animals and severity of testing for regulatory purposes.*” (Defra, 2007)

⁸ Smith et al. (2005) report on a successful initiative between 10-16 pharmaceutical companies and two animal protection organizations to agree to approaches for minimizing dog use in the preclinical safety evaluation of new pharmaceuticals.

- Detailed information in applications to use animals

For some people, disclosure of information within specific applications for using animals is of particular interest. It is argued that this would allow external observers to assess the quality and necessity of research, and the quality of regulation. This in turn would enhance public confidence – assuming that the quality of regulation merits it. Some countries are more progressive on this than others. For example, in Sweden (in accordance with the Swedish Freedom of Information legislation) applications to use animals are available for anyone who is interested in seeing them⁹.

Some researchers have concerns about making information available that may compromise commercial competitiveness, intellectual and commercial property rights, or the award of a patent. Others are concerned that publicizing what they do may allow the identification of a person or their place of work, which could compromise personal safety¹⁰.

The majority of people involved in the debate understand the rationale for withholding specific information for the first set of reasons and that there may be a legitimate argument for doing so in some cases. However, it is important that these concerns are addressed on an individual basis and are not employed disingenuously as a blanket reason for keeping all information confidential. With regard to the second reason, very few people actually seek personal information – and in many cases this is already freely available anyway to anyone with a computer, since scientific papers are published in journals available on the internet.

- Other types of information

Providing details of intended research projects prior to authorization is just one element of the process. Openness needs to apply to the *whole system* of animal use. Everyone should be more open about the role and reason for animal research and testing in their work and the approach taken to promoting the 3Rs. This includes:

- local institutions (each university or company);
- governments – policy and process of licensing and control of animal experiments;
- regulatory agencies (medicines, chemicals, health and safety);
- funders (e.g., medical health charities);
- learned societies and professional bodies;
- scientific journals that publish animal research;
- those who develop, market, and retail products that required animal use or testing at some stage of their development.

While more can be done across the board in relation to openness and the communication of truly meaningful information, there are some examples of good, or promising, practice to be found.

A recent editorial in *Nature* (Anon, 2011) states that “*there is no excuse for institutions that house animal research – includ-*

ing most research universities – not to have vigorous and well-defined programmes to explain what goes on within their walls. Institutions should publicize the high standards that they are required to meet before they can use animals. They should also discuss their strategies to replace animals with more sophisticated research tools, refine research practice and reduce the overall number of animals used. If they have no such strategies, institutions should develop them as a priority.” For the most part, companies in industry appear to be better at doing this than universities. The websites of some organizations^{11,12} show that it is possible to provide a great deal of information relating to the numbers and species of animals used, some of the steps being taken to implement the 3Rs specific to the work undertaken within that company, relevant ethical and animal welfare policies, and housing and care standards.

In terms of the *licensing and control of animal experiments*, the UK Home Office annual publication from the Animal Scientific Procedures Inspectorate¹³ is an example of a publication that sheds some useful light on the role of government officials in implementing the UK animal experiments law – though perhaps more could be said about how the harm-benefit assessment and project evaluation is actually carried out in practice.

At the *regulatory agency* level (for the control of medicines, chemicals, health, and safety) there is still much scope for improvement in terms of allowing people to understand the way regulations requiring animal use are developed and applied in practice and the process for the acceptance of new humane alternative methods.

Some *funders*, such as the Medical Research Council (MRC, 2004; NC3Rs, 2010) and Defra¹⁴ in the UK, do provide statements or publications regarding their expectations, policies, or the outputs of the research they fund. However, in general, there is usually limited information forthcoming from funding bodies about how research strategies are determined and, especially, how outcomes are evaluated and reviewed – yet this is critically important in any overall consideration of the use of animals in research and testing.

Given the important role that *scientific journals* can play in raising the standard of science (and animal welfare) undertaken, each one should be clear and explicit about what they expect from researchers, the criteria they use to accept or reject papers, and how the use of animals should be reported. Disappointingly, a recent study found that less than 15% of editorial policies require that the research submitted has undergone ethical review; less than 3% refer to the 3Rs, around 20% simply make statements such as “relevant legislation” should be followed, and just 3% have requirements relating to the inclusion of essential information such as species, strain, and housing conditions (RSPCA, 2010).

⁹ www.forskautandjurforsok.se/in-english/animal-experiments/

¹⁰ Though there is actually said to be “no link between speaking out and gaining the attention of extremists” (Festing, 2005).

¹¹ www.novonordisk.com/science/bioethics/animal_ethics.asp

¹² www.animalstudies.bayer.com/en/introduction-animals.aspx

¹³ www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/769901/annual-reports/animals-annual-report-2010

¹⁴ <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/>



4 Improving the current situation

There are numerous approaches available for promoting openness. These include:

- making information, reports, and policies available via the websites of companies, universities, funding bodies, or regulators;
- establishments using animals offering visits for local groups, schools, colleges, and parliamentarians;
- companies, regulators, or individuals taking part in television documentaries and news features, and;
- product announcements and press coverage of scientific breakthroughs that mention how animals were involved in the research and testing process.

Any information provided has to be easily accessible in presentation and language. It also has to be meaningful and it has to be honest.

Those using or promoting the use of animals must avoid providing an overly sanitized account of animal suffering, overplaying the potential benefits, or merely regurgitating generic statements. This will not help with openness. It also is important that a clear distinction is made between the general importance of undertaking investigation into a particular research area or disease, for example, and the relevance, value, and contribution a *specific research study using animals* might make.

Similarly, animal protection organizations also should be honest about the actual levels of animal suffering involved and acknowledge where a particular use of animals has led to a clear and realized benefit.

Finally, when considering what openness actually looks like, what it means in practice, and how it can be achieved, there may be a temptation for people using animals in experiments to think that if they can just tell people in short words what they are doing, then people will understand and automatically accept and approve. However, this is unlikely to be the case. Large sectors of the public have, and likely always will have, significant and legitimate concerns about the suffering of animals in laboratories, and this is something that must be accepted and acknowledged.

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