

# Communicating harms done to animals in scientific research

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## Background

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA) is a piece of enabling legislation that allows researchers to carry out scientific experiments and tests using animals that may cause them pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm, which would otherwise be a breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

By default, research on animals that is licensed by the Home Office under ASPA has the potential to cause those animals harm - either physical or psychological. Organisations that are signed up to the Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK should be transparent about the use and experiences of the animals under their care, the expected impact of the research on animals, and the steps taken to reduce these and to improve animal welfare.

Representatives of Concordat signatories met in May 2018 to discuss the challenges of communicating openly about harms, and to identify recommendations for good practice when discussing the experiences of animals.

Following a presentation which set out the issues (also available on the Concordat website), attendees formed small discussion groups to explore some key questions. A summary of the points raised in these discussions follows:

## Is there a pressure not to talk about harms to animals?

'Managing risk' is important for the senior management in all institutions and some believe that openly talking about the harms that animals experience may impact fundraising, or student choice of university. In some organisations senior managers and communications staff, who have not been part of the 'openness' conversation throughout, can see discussion of harms as 'negative framing' and a risk that can be avoided. The temptation is to put a positive spin, and avoid the more challenging ideas. Within some establishments, there can also be complicated sign-off processes when talking about animal research, particularly when harms are involved, and this can discourage putting the information into the public domain.

There are concerns about what people working in senior management and other roles within an organisation may think if harms to animals are discussed more explicitly. Good communication

about harms within an organisation should include opportunities for justifying how animals are used. This can be easier to manage in small organisations and may be more difficult in larger institutions.

The Concordat has brought more imagery showing research animals into the public domain, but most images still relate to stock animals that are not on study (just in their housing, or being carefully handled etc). There are still relatively few images of animals actually undergoing experiments that show the realities of what happens to them. As public dialogue initiatives illustrated that the public would like greater access to these types of images, Concordat signatories are urged to show more images and video of animals undergoing procedures to build understanding and transparency. There were some concerns that the Home Office may not allow this, as ASPA prohibits images, filming or public viewing of procedures 'for entertainment purposes', but the understanding of other attendees was that images and video of animals already undergoing licensed procedures specifically for scientific purposes can be taken, and made available for the additional purposes of education or transparency.

When working with media on a press release or news story discussion of harms is a complex and challenging area. It is essential to highlight the benefits of research, and it can be difficult to talk clearly and honestly about harms without becoming too negative. In addition, some organisations have complicated sign off processes for communications around animal research, particularly those that may involve the media. The inclusion of 'negative' information about harms can decrease the chances of senior managers, often from other teams in the organisation with little knowledge of animal research, providing authorisation for public communication.

### Who is exerting the pressure?

- Researchers, who are concerned that others may disapprove of their work or that talking about harms may provoke hostility.
- Communications teams, who are concerned harms to animals may overshadow the research
- The animal team, who want to show their animals in the best light
- Openness committee at organisation
- The idea that the 'ends justify the means' for animal research, and that once a favourable harm-benefit analysis has been received, the public and others should trust that the harms to animals have been justified.

### What support is needed for those communicating about 'harms'?

- A general resource – with good examples - on how to talk about harms experienced by research animals that others can refer to.
- Clarity within and from the Home Office Animal Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) about what can be shown to public.
- Recognition among Concordat signatories that most of us present a sanitised version of events and that we need to commit to greater transparency.

## General advice and good practice

If we are honest, we should admit that animals may and do suffer when used in research. The public already assumes this to be the case. When we talk about harms we should give context, and clear, relatable answers.

All public engagement work on animals in research involves talking about harms, as the questions are inevitably raised by audiences. We can and should extend this into other forms of communication practice.

We have a duty of care to balance what will give people a full picture with what they can accept, and what is appropriate for the audience and the medium. Graphic images such as surgery (even when humans are involved) would probably not be appropriate for the TV six-o'clock news, and the public do not expect to see them. They may, however, provide a useful helpful insight when used or made available in other situations.

When asked, the public say that they do not necessarily want the gory details of animal research, but would like more information about the harms involved. When they are provided with information they inevitably tell us it is not as bad as they thought. We can be bold in talking about the research we do, as long as we give appropriate context and are honest.

Including actual severity statistics on animal research websites is a low-risk way of being more open about harms. Putting well-written non-technical summaries of project licences onto websites is good compliance practice and can be a step towards openness.

The language used should be clear but sensitive and respectful. Glossing and sweeping statements such as “highest possible welfare standards” should be avoided. Animals should be referred to as “humanely killed” rather than “euthanised”.

Winners of the Annual Openness awards are expected to communicate harms well, and show good practice.