Weighing ethical decisions against the benefits of research

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“The animal welfare/rights perspective”

- No such thing as “the” perspective.
- Very diverse viewpoints.
- Range of research is itself diverse and how these viewpoints interact is complex.
"I weep for you," the Walrus said: 
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes…
(extract from "The Walrus and the Carpenter", which appears in Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There by Lewis Carroll).

What is involved in weighing ethical considerations against the benefit?

• Valuing the benefits of research is part of the ethical decision, not separate.
• Justification – threshold question. What are the expected benefits? What is the impact on animals – all impacts? How do these stack up?
• Other issues that influence justification:
  • Alternatives – availability and use (replacement)
  • Numbers of animals used (reduction)
  • Welfare once protocol underway (refinement).
Justification

- An evolving issue – what may have been considered justified in the past may not continue to be justified.
- Complex – sometimes for a protocol to be considered justified there needs to be a lot of faith placed in the outcome. Is this appropriate? How to keep track?
- Close relationship between justification and the availability of alternatives.

Alternatives

- Immense challenge in keeping up with development of alternatives – both awareness and the ability to make use of them.
- Alternatives may actually exist but only via other disciplines – how to approach this?
- Validation – can some protocols be part of the process of validating alternatives, so that some protocols are the last of their kind?
Numbers

• Important to get the balance right between reduction and scientific value.
• If the results end up being statistically questionable, then there can be no justification at the fundamental level.
• Also numbers in production can easily be overlooked.

Welfare

• Once decision to use animals is made, the obligation to minimise any suffering is paramount.
• Lots of species-specific detail to consider, this is an area that is constantly evolving.
• Danger that this becomes the focus of committees rather than the threshold questions of use.