Education, Training and Ethics Section - "The only way is Ethics"
A workshop held at the LASA Annual Conference, November 2017

LASA's Education, Training and Ethics Section (ETES) organises a workshop each year at the LASA Annual Conference in November. These are always interactive with plenty of enthusiastic audience participation and, depending on the topic, may lead to the development of reports, guidelines or training materials. This short report summarises the 2017 workshop which focused on ethics.

Introduction

ETES convener Dr Manuel Berdoy (Oxford University) introduced the session with an update on progress since the 2016 Winter meeting when the topic discussed had been "*Assessing skills – could do better*". The output from that ETES session will be taken forward in a meeting on assessment planned for January 23, 2018.

Turning to the current session, Manuel explained that its title reflects the fact that ethics is, or should be, the start of everything we do. He then handed over to Dr James Yeats, the Chief Veterinary Officer of the RSPCA, who is a recognised specialist in animal welfare, law and ethics.

Ethical frameworks and concepts

James began by providing a brief background to ethical concepts and frameworks describing what ethics is, and what it is not. He explained that ethics is not just about emotions, but about *values.* It should not be viewed as just an academic theoretical exercise. It is fundamental to all of our lives and provides a basis for how we should make decisions about practical actions e.g. about: what (not) to do; how (not) to live; and what (not) to approve of.

'Doing ethics' involves engaging in discussion to discover other people's views and evaluate and reflect on these. It provides a way to help expose unjustified claims and avoid biases in order to be logical, consistent, fair and impartial rather than making abstract decisions. Ethical skills also help us to justify and prepare a defense of our views.

James stressed that it is important to consider and understand where principles of ethics come from, whether this is philosophy, starting with Aristotle, or religion. He then described some of the difficult ethical dilemmas that are encountered in the veterinary context. Vets have responsibilities to many different people as well as their animal patients and this means there are many difficult decisions required. Veterinary patients usually have owners who must be considered as well as the veterinary patient; and veterinary practices are businesses that need to survive, so there are economic factors to consider as well.

He explained that some of the ethical dilemmas in veterinary practice are caused by the animals' owners or by society in general. For example, when a vet is delivering bulldog puppies from a bitch that has difficulty giving birth, should they spay the animal or risk perpetuating a bloodline where birth is difficult? An example with respect to farm animals is whether pigs should have their tails docked, a painful procedure carried out to prevent catastrophic tail biting in a herd. The procedure results in neuroma formation which is painful for the pig every time the stump is touched. Continuing the practice perpetuates the use of husbandry systems that result in tail biting. As a vet you are likely to be unhappy about the cause of these sort of situations but not know what you can do about them,

and this can be difficult to come to terms with.

James then said that when faced with ethical dilemmas it is useful to identify all of the ethical elements, looking at both factual and value elements. In the veterinary and laboratory science field, one has responsibilities to oneself, colleagues, animals, bosses, professional bodies and wider society. So, for example, if faced with killing a dog, there are several approaches: to focus on the person and consider what a kind, generous compassionate person would do; to focus on the action - what is or is not allowed in a given situation, what is best for the dog, what are the rules or requirements; and to focus on the outcomes - which is that the dog no longer exists.

Audience participation
James then invited the audience to participate in a hypothetical 'life boat scenario' as a way of analysing our approach to an ethical dilemma. The scenario involves three people adrift on a life boat with little chance of immediate rescue and limited food and water. Various options for survival were posed including two people stealing all the supplies in order to prolong their own survival at the expense of the third, or the two actively pushing the third person off the boat! There followed a very active discussion of what audience members would do, and how and why, with James from time to time changing the variables to see how this changed the views. Much emphasis was placed on the value of the individuals and the long term consequences psychologically for anyone who actively pushed one of the people into the briny. No one in the room favoured this latter option. All wanted to hold out for rescue!!

While fanciful, these sort of scenarios can be re-designed to be analogous to the animal research context. If thoughtfully prepared, they could be used to dissect and articulate the values at play in decision making in different situations.

Practical ethics and the 'Nexus' project

After coffee the session continued with a talk by Dr Beth Greenhough, a social scientist at the University of Oxford. Her research interest focusses on human and animal interactions and how these are shaped by place, for example how rats are viewed differently in different situations (as pets, pests, or laboratory animals). Beth reported on her study, carried out together with Emma Roe and funded by the Wellcome Trust, looking at the culture of care and the future of laboratory animal welfare.

The main focus of the project was to explore how animal technicians put the culture of care into practice. This explored ethics *in principle* (agreed principles and norms) and ethics *in practice* (acting on intuition; day to day care; instinctive skills; tacit knowledge - informal, learned and developed over time and which may be site specific).

Much of the project time was spent with animal technologists, shadowing them in their work and learning about what is involved. Beth and Emma looked at how animal technologists' sense of their work develops through the first two years of their career, and how they reconcile challenges for the animal, for the organisation and for themselves and colleagues. The report was based on verbatim quotes from the animal technologists interviewed. Some of the particularly challenging issues covered were:

Speaking out: Although there is a strong culture in many establishments of encouraging people to speak out, new animal technicians are not always confident to do this and we need to think about how we

give people the confidence and opportunities to voice any concerns they may have.

Implementing refinement: There is a lot of job satisfaction in implementing refinement even when this is micro refinement, i.e. small changes that make a difference to the animals. However animal technologists recognise the concern that, if this is done unsystematically, it might affect the science. They had questions about how far the knowledge travels, how they share information and whether there is funding to put refinements into place.

Increased biosecurity measures: Increased biosecurity, while good for animal health, does affect the all important relationship of staff with the animals. Conventional cages were preferred over IVCs because they enabled better interaction with the animals

Reconciling obligations: We heard of the difficulties animal technologists have of balancing obligations to science, animals and the people they work with. This included practical challenges of addressing stock control and overbreeding and the fact that they had to meet the ethical challenge of killing animals that are "surplus".

Knowing what the animals are used for and why are important questions which help animal technologists cope with what happens to the animals in their care. They need to be able to talk to researchers, feel engaged, have their scientific background acknowledged and the nature of their own work recognised.

Skills and learning: This provided another set of challenges: how can someone become a good animal technologist?

First it is important to recruit the 'right kind of person'; then to create an environment where the right skills thrive. Just doing the minimum required, or only being concerned with the pay, is not enough without the emotional investment and an interest in animals. The nature of the work means that learning is a continuous process with practical skills learnt on the job.

Interviewees explained that spending time in an animal research environment can change the way they think about animal ethics in other contexts. There is an acknowledged tendency for species to be valued more the longer that time is spent with them. For example, when working with mice someone can value these animals more than they had done previously and recognise that such animals have feelings too.

This view was later echoed by the audience who argued that only people who care about animals should work with them - if you do not agonize about some difficult welfare decisions should you be doing the work? This led to the following point: do researchers who do not go into the animal unit become more likely to be detached and lose concern for the animals? Barriers, such as restricted unit access, can also disassociate people from the animals their projects depend upon.

Emerging issues: The culture of care and openness were highlighted as emerging issues. For animal technologists this involves having clear established good practice. This includes, for example, double-checking to confirm death after humanely killing animals, with real responsibility shared between the whole community working in the lab. But key questions were how does one know what the 'culture of care' is (broken down into its practical elements) and how does one know if it is working well.

The openness agenda was seen as an opportunity in that animal technologists wanted to be able to be more open. However, unlike in nursing where everyone is involved in ethical decision making, some felt vulnerable since a lot of the ethical decision making is burdened on a small minority.

Beth concluded her presentation by explaining that a goal of the Animal Research Nexus project is to create a more nuanced public debate. With the current project, she and her colleagues would like to use the data to promote opportunities to reflect on the findings. In the ETES view the report of the project when finalised should be essential reading at all establishments[1].

Raising and discussing ethical dilemmas - audience input

To end the day, attendees were asked to provide an (anonymised) example of an ethical dilemma that they had struggled with. These were collected on post-its and sorted into categories with two selected for discussion. These were:
- what to do when a prestigious journal asks for more data before agreeing to publish research that the principal author believes is complete; and
- whether, when and how to report a colleague who has made a mistake.

Vigorous discussion of both scenarios ensued! However, all of the examples provided were interesting and ETES members felt it would be useful to publish them all as a 'discussion tool' that could be used in modular and other training courses on ethics. The examples are provided here.

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[1] *See the website for the project at: https://www.animalresearchnexus.org*

See also: Greenhough, B. and Roe, E. (2017) Exploring the Role of Animal Technologists in Implementing the 3Rs: An Ethnographic Investigation of the UK University **Sector Science, Technology and Human Values** *https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243917718066*

http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0162243917718066

http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0158791