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How to communicate with the general public

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Laboratory animal scientists and academic staff of animal facilities are often approached by lay persons, school children, students, journalists, opponents to animal experimentation etc. These various groups of people either want to be informed about animal experimentation or want to put forward that they are against the use of animals for scientific purposes. The unease expressed at animal experimentation can be based on ethical considerations, concern or ignorance. The various groups of people are entitled to obtain information about animal experimentation and/or to share the opinions of laboratory animal scientists. It is the general public that either directly or indirectly furnishes the resources for animal research. It is also the general public that consumes the outcome of animal experimentation.

A number of prerequisites should be met by laboratory animal scientists for communication with the general public to be productive. These prerequisites are: be honest, be accessible, present your information clearly and concisely but do not exaggerate or oversimplify, avoid premature or unbalanced statements for the sake of personal ambition, avoid pure propaganda, reserve sufficient time for the interview or debate and be relaxed. It is useful to collect data on the background of the interviewer(s) or your opponent(s) and to know whether a current issue has generated the interest in animal experimentation.

In contacts with the general public there are

certain questions or statements that will generally be advanced. It is helpful to be aware of these general questions and to have adequate answers, ideally supported by logical arguments. Below, I describe a number of general questions or statements and possible reactions.

Why animal experimentation? To produce and test vaccines, to determine the toxicity of new drugs and other chemical substances. Animal use is necessary to develop drugs and to speed up and assist the process of discovery in general. Animals are necessary to gain basic knowledge to support the above-mentioned. In order to gain such knowledge, questions have to be addressed that are not experimentally accessible in humans. If we don't perform animal experiments we would deprive sick human beings of the benefits of these experiments.

Animals have rights and thus cannot be used for experiments! The concept of animal rights is not a practical one. However, man has obligations towards animals, including those in experiments. The laboratory animal scientist protects animals in experiments on the basis of ethical considerations but also because animals that are not distressed produce results that are more reliable.

Animal use is not necessary; without it we would also have gained present knowledge! There is no proof for this statement (likewise, there is no proof for the reverse). Examples of history (discovery of insulin, discovery of the principles of immunization

etc) strongly suggest that animal research invariably was the basis of important medical breakthroughs.

We use large numbers of animals, especially for trivial purposes such as cosmetics testing! When expressed relative to the number of people, the number of animals used is relatively small. In the Netherlands, with a population of about 15 million, about 1 million animals (vertebrates) are used each year. This is equivalent to 1 animal per 15 inhabitants or, put in another way, 5 animals for each inhabitant during his/her entire life span. In addition, the number of animals used is declining. Compared with the number of animals we eat, the number of animals used for experiments is small. Do realize however, that although other ways of animal use (consumption, hunting etc) can put animal experimentation in perspective, they cannot justify it. The number of animals used to test cosmetics is relatively low; in the Netherlands it amounts to about 50 out of 1 million animals per year. This number will even drop because alternative methods are being developed.

Animal data cannot be extrapolated to man! This is indeed often true. However, as outlined above, extrapolation in its strict sense is not the basis for animal experimentation. As to testing of chemicals, the following question should be asked. Would it be sensible to expose people to chemicals that cause cancer in laboratory animals?

Experimentation causes pain in animals! Yes, it often does, but if we don't carry out animal research we may allow undue suffering of humans by preventing its alleviation. Furthermore, pain in animals is reduced as much as possible because it can jeopardize results and make animals intractable.

Animal experimentation is deliberately hidden from the public! Show people your facility. If experiments are being carried out that cause severe discomfort, it is advised to first show the visitors human beings with the disease for which the animal experiments are designed to gain insight into. To take

away the impression that investigators are not controlled, one could point to the appropriate act (decree) on animal experimentation and to ethical committees.

Animal use is not necessary; there are alternative methods! Explain that alternative methods may work only for routine tests but only after validation, which needs animal experimentation. Alternative methods are being developed, partly because they are less expensive than the classical methods.

Scientists use animals for the sake of their own career! This is partly true. However, the general public benefits most from active, motivated research workers.

The questions and statements discussed are those generally purported, but the list may be expanded. In contacts with journalists they may also come up. However, journalists are usually interested in animal experimentation in relation to a current issue (kidnapping of laboratory animals etc). Journalists want news which is fast, exciting, concrete and unbalanced. Concerning an interview for a newspaper article, one should make agreements with the journalist beforehand. Ability to correct the text before publishing could be a prerequisite for the interview to be given. Interviews for recorded television programs can yield disappointing results. By cutting the tape, the journalist can let you say whatever he/she wants or place you in a tendentious context. In an interview for a life television program, there is no editing. However, one usually gets no more than one minute to inform the public about animal experimentation. If not well-prepared beforehand, such television appearance can easily turn out counterproductive.

Summary of discussion

The subject was restricted to the communication with the general public, often represented by journalists. Initially, it was also stated that we have to approach them with the prerequisite that they are entitled to get the proper information.

Some general rules were given, for example be honest, be clear and concise, don't exaggerate, don't oversimplify, prepare yourself with answers

to common questions and examples of benefits from animals used in biomedical research. Also consider whether or not to seek support from professional public relation staff.

When communicating, try to concentrate on a few issues and try to put forward questions yourself. Avoid pure propaganda.

A few examples of general statements were given that might be useful:

- All humans, livestock and pets are consumers of the results from animal research.
- Relatively few animals are used for trivial purposes, e.g. cosmetics.
- The development of alternative methods, not

using live animals, is stimulated by their relatively lower costs.

- Data from animals cannot always be extrapolated to man, but it reduces the risks.
- Give figures and facts on other human use of animals, but don't use it to justify lab-animal use.
- Pictures of severely diseased humans might underline the need for biomedical research.

It was recommended that ICLAS addresses editors of journals so as to point out that animals and their environment should be described adequately, and that certain guidelines should be followed concerning the ethical aspects of animal use.

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