

Improving the Effectiveness of Research Ethics Committees



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Issue
 Animal Ethics Committees (AECs) for animal-based research play a key role in research governance, but there has been little study of the factors influencing their effectiveness.

Research Objective
 To examine how AEC committee effectiveness is influenced by committee composition and dynamics, recruitment of members, workload, participation level, and member turnover. The research identified problems and suggested possible remedies for AEC functioning.

Methods - Ethnographic Approach
Data Collection: 1) Participant observation: CAS was a member of one AEC for 2.5 years and 2) interviews with 28 AEC members from 4 universities in western Canada: 13 scientists, 4 animal technicians, 3 veterinarians, 2 non-animal-users, and 6 community members.
Data Analysis: Inductive coding of interview transcripts to identify themes relevant to understanding the personal experiences of being a member with a focus on the processes involved in preparing for and carrying out meetings.

Results - 5 Problems and 5 Solutions

Problem (1) Committee composition creates bias towards institutional/research interests versus interests of animals

- Composition varied from 7-17 members.
- Institutional members made up the largest proportion (71-94%, including 42-67% scientists).
- 3/4 chairpersons were scientists.
- Community members reported feeling that they had limited power or voice because they were outnumbered.

- Solutions:**
- Increase the number of community members.
 - Choose a chairperson that is not an institutional scientist.
 - Use a consensus approach for decision-making so that the majority does not rule.
 - Use a committee that it is not affiliated with the institution.
 - Clarify function(s) expected of the committee and design composition accordingly.

Problem (2) Committee dynamics prevent full participation of members

- Community members (3/6) found the committee atmosphere intimidating because they felt:
 - Intimidated by scientists.
 - They had insufficient expertise.
 - That they were “outsiders”.
 - A lack of appreciation for their contributions.
- 1 animal technician felt her opinion was discounted.
- Most recognized the importance of the chairperson in improving committee functioning.

- Solutions:**
- Provide respectful and open committee atmosphere so that member(s) do not feel intimidated:
 - Train members about the function of the committee.
 - Clarify roles of minority members so their distinctive contributions are valued.
 - Provide training for the chairperson.
 - Ensure that individual members do not dominate discussion.
 - Increase the proportion of minority members to reduce feelings of isolation or intimidation.
 - Recruit animal technicians who do not work for other committee members.

Problem (3) Recruitment strategies create bias towards institutional/research interests versus interests of animals

- 5/6 community members were recruited as friends, relatives or neighbours of the AEC.
- Word-of-mouth recruitment runs the risk of recruiting members who are perceived to “fit in.”

- Solutions:**
- Recruit community members who are fully independent of the institution by:
 - Advertising for members.
 - Approaching community organizations for nominations.
 - Allowing community members to nominate themselves.
 - Recruiting members from animal protection groups.
 - Considering applications from all people.

Problem (4) Motivation for joining is to pursue agendas other than committee mandate

- Several scientists joined the AEC to promote their own or their department’s agenda, in some cases to limit the committee’s actions.
- 1 scientist was recruited because he was perceived as a “complainer.”
- Institutions were concerned about recruiting animal right advocates, but 1 AEC had found that such a member improved their committee effectiveness.

- Solutions:**
- Ensure, perhaps through interviews, that all prospective members know and accept the mandate of the committee.
 - Equalize the proportion of different types of members so that no one perspective dominates.

Problem (5) Excessive workload or inadequate participation for adequate review

- Committees reviewed an average of 18 protocols per meeting (range 0-49) and an average of 191 protocols per year (range 7-313)
- 3 committees assigned detailed protocol review to 2 members, thus some members scanned most protocols.
- Members who read all protocols in detail spent more total time preparing for meetings but less time per protocol compared to those who only read their assigned protocol (Table 1). Regardless, the majority felt they had sufficient time to do a good job.
- Some members were concerned that member absence had a negative effect on the review process.

- Solutions:**
- Establish realistic level of time commitment per member and design committee functioning to stay within this limit.
 - Ensure prospective members agree to the required time commitment.
 - Form another committee to share the workload.
 - Increase committee size to allow members time off.
 - Ensure that the institution rewards participation.
 - Create policy to limit absenteeism.
 - Ensure that all members read all protocols sufficiently to make a judgment.

Table 1. Time spent in preparation for monthly Animal Ethics Committee meetings for those committee members who read all or several protocols in detail.

Type of Member	Preparation Time (median and range)	
	hours/meeting	minutes/protocol
Read all protocols in detail	6.7 (0.75-9.0)	23 (4-60)
Read several protocols in detail	3.0 (0.75-7.0)	45 (21-150)

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