
The Attending Veterinarian's Contract of Employment: Curse or Blessing for Animals in Research Institutions?

Viktor Reinhardt
Animal Welfare Institute
Washington, D.C.

When attending veterinarians are not provided adequate job security by research institutions, there is no guarantee that they are reliable allies of animals and implement the provisions set forth in the federal animal welfare regulations.

Animal research facilities are generally closed to the public, making it almost impossible for an outsider to verify if the animals are properly housed and cared for. The public is made to believe that "Like most people, scientists are concerned about animal well-being. ... And scientists themselves have adopted the principle: 'Good Animal Care and Good Science Go Hand in Hand' "(Public Health Service, 1994, p. 13). As a safeguard for 'Good Animal Care' federal regulations require that "Each research facility shall employ an attending veterinarian ... [and] assure that the attending veterinarian has appropriate authority to ensure the provision of adequate veterinary care and to oversee the adequacy of other aspects of animal care" (Code of Federal Regulations, 1995, § 2.33) such as handling and training (§ 2.33), exercise for dogs (§ 3.8), and environmental enhancement for nonhuman primates (§ 3.81). The attending veterinarian - or his/her designee - also has to be a voting member of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (§ 2.33) which reviews, approves or disapproves the facility's animal care and research programs (§ 2.31).

What kind of "appropriate authority" does the attending veterinarian have to implement housing and handling conditions in accordance with the federal regulations, when they are in conflict with the scientific investigator's interests? After all, it is the investigator's grant money which not only funds the research project but which also contributes to the support of the research institution itself. The attending veterinarian, on the other hand, is a legal and financial burden. Typically, veterinarians - unlike investigators - are not offered tenure arrangements for job security. This makes them extremely vulnerable to retribution whenever their advice is in contradiction with the demands of a well-funded researcher. A veterinarian, for example, who persistently disapproves research that subjects animals to avoidable distress (e.g., long-term social deprivation, long-term mechanical immobilization) and who is unwilling to participate in such projects is at high risk of being stigmatized as a research obstructionist, particularly if the project in question adds a lot of money to the institution's budget. The fear of losing their job is a serious ethical challenge for many attending veterinarians. To blame them for becoming allies of investigators would be unfair. The big problem, however, is that the animals will have to pay for this alliance in terms of housing and handling conditions that may meet the perceived needs of investigators but not the real needs of animals.

In order to make use of their legal authority not only as members of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (Silverman, 2000) but also as professionals in charge of implementing federal animal welfare regulations, the attending veterinarians have to be provided with much better job security which will allow them to do their work as reliable allies of

the animals. The research enterprise can only benefit from such an alliance because this will be an assurance that scientific data are not unduly confounded by extraneous variables resulting from species-inadequate husbandry practices of the research subjects. Moreover, to have the unconditional support of a veterinarian may well reassure some of the concerned public.

REFERENCES

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