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Public expectations of the NVS

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Abstract

Surveys have shown that vets are in general highly trusted by the public, because of their role to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care, as stated in their declaration to the RCVS. However, there do not seem to be any published surveys regarding the public's views on, or expectations of, laboratory animal vets. For this paper, therefore, we asked a wide range of friends and colleagues, constituting a broad spectrum of 'the public', what they would expect of vets in laboratories. The answers ranged from the view that this presented vets with an unacceptable conflict of interest, through the opinion that vets should be the ones who carried out all procedures, to more practical expectations regarding their authority in prioritising animal welfare within science, providing knowledge and expertise in animal health and welfare, giving a well considered opinion on ethical issues, supporting other Named Persons and contributing to the Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body. The presentation will aim to generate further discussion on these views and expectations, why they may be held, and how realistic they are in actuality.

1. Introduction

The RSPCA, which represents a significant sector of the public, believes the role of the NVS to be crucial to the effective implementation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA) and has clear expectations of the role, which will be covered later in this paper. But what might the wider public think? There are two points which might provide a simple answer:

- Animal experiments are a high profile issue and polls have shown that people are concerned about animal suffering and want to see it reduced, or ended altogether.
- People associate vets in general with caring for and treating animals, to ensure their health and welfare and stop them from suffering.

These points might lead people to think either that "vets should work in labs and their role is to stop suffering in experiments" or "vets could not possibly work in labs because of the animal suffering that occurs there" - and we have heard both views expressed. However, we were interested to discover whether there was any factual information in the public domain that could provide a more detailed - or nuanced - view on what the 'wider' public thinks and expects of the role of the NVS.

2. Sources of information searched

There have been numerous surveys of public opinion on the use of animals in scientific research and testing (e.g. Ipsos MORI 2014), but is there any information on how the general public views the role of the Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS) in establishments where animal procedures are carried out? We researched this question using a number of different sources and approaches, as listed below.

2.1 Legislation

Legislation should, in general, reflect public opinion (although laws may lag behind prevailing attitudes) and so should provide some clues to public expectations. In the case of animal use in scientific procedures, legislation around the world requires that vets have a role in the regulation of such use, though the exact nature of the role may vary from country to country. The role of the NVS in the UK as set out in the Home Office Guidance on the Operation of the ASPA (Home Office 2014, pp 72-74) is probably the most comprehensive anywhere in the world. However, although the Guidance is freely available, public awareness of it is likely to be very low.

2.2 Public opinion polls

Public opinion on the veterinary profession as a whole is high - the recent RCVS/BVA national opinion poll of 2000 members of the public showed that "94% of the public trusts the veterinary profession generally or completely" (Anonymous 2015). However, the focus of the poll was on vets in practice, and in searching the web we could not find any comparable survey specifically addressing the public's views on - or expectations of - vets in labs.

The regular Ipsos MORI polls on the use of animals in research from 1999 to 2014 have focussed on whether or not the public accepts animal use and whether they had confidence in its regulation. Respondents were clearly very concerned about animal suffering and the need to prevent this as far as possible, but there did not appear to be any mention of the role of vets *per se* either in the questions posed or in the answers.

2.3 Consultations for the Concordat on Openness

RSPCA Research Animals Department staff were involved in the development of the public consultation workshops carried out for the Concordat on Openness in 2013 (UAR 2015). The workshops comprised groups of people selected as having no specific knowledge or interest in animal experiments, so were a useful sample of a genuine 'general public', and provided a potential source of information.

2.4 Informal survey of friends and colleagues

In the absence of formal information, we asked a wide range of friends and colleagues, constituting a broad spectrum of 'the public', what they would expect of vets in labs. This did not constitute a proper survey, but it did provide a good sample of the range of views likely to be held within the wider population. Everyone we talked to thought it was an interesting and important topic which deserved further exploration.

2.5 The RSPCA view

The RSPCA has a supporter base of over 500,000 people, and so represents a significant sector of the public which is concerned about animal suffering. Reducing suffering in experiments is a high priority for the Society and its supporters and it has well defined views on the role of the NVS and other Named Persons under the ASPA.

3. Summary of comments received

Information collected from 2.3 to 2.5 above provided comments from three categories of people:

- i. Those that knew nothing i.e. people with no specific interest or background in animal experiments, including participants in the Concordat-related workshops
- ii. Those that knew a little i.e. people with an interest in animal welfare and a little knowledge of animal in research and testing (including participants in the Concordat-related workshops once these had started); and
- iii. Those that knew a lot i.e. animal welfare organisations (RSPCA and FRAME) and others with detailed knowledge.

3.1 Those with no specific knowledge of animal experiments

The conclusion from talking to 'ordinary' people i.e. those with no knowledge of, or particular interest in, animal experiments, is that it is doubtful whether the 'average member of the public' actually knows that vets do have a role in the research environment; and they certainly do not know

anything about the role of the NVS. Even some veterinary students do not seem to know about the NVS role given this quote from a participant in the LAVA Extramural Scheme (PLF 2015): *"My placement under the LAVA EMS-scheme was a massive eye-opener. Despite being a final year vet student, I had no idea what the NVS actually did and the true nature of animal testing..."* This should be a serious concern. (There is of course plenty of information about the role of the NVS on many different laboratory animal related websites, but you would need to have a specific interest in the topic and know where to look.)

Nevertheless, three common themes emerged from discussions:

- **Conflicts of interests**

Some people questioned how vets, who loved animals and had dedicated themselves to looking after them, could work in an environment where animals were deliberately caused pain, suffering or distress. How could that possibly fit with the declaration that a veterinary surgeon makes to the RCVS? That is:

*"I promise and solemnly declare that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the RCVS, and that **above all, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care.**"*

- **Carrying out scientific procedures**

In the Concordat workshops, several participants expected that vets would carry out all scientific procedures on animals on the grounds that they would be well trained, skilled and competent. The thought that a non-veterinary trained person could carry out procedures on animals was considered to be wrong.

- **Level of authority**

Once participants in these workshops gained a better understanding of the regulation and operation of animal experiments, their concerns focussed on ensuring that 'welfare officers' (presumably including vets as well as other animal care staff) should have enough seniority to *"stand against senior research teams"* and put the case for animal welfare against other considerations (Ipsos MORI 2013).

It was suggested that there would be various ways an institution could signal the enhanced role of the 'welfare officer' to the public. This could include the officer having a job title which clearly showed they were at the highest level of the organisation; having a role in all project licence applications; being able to request CCTV footage of any procedure; and having a clear line of contact with the Home Office Inspectorate and a good relationship with external animal welfare organisations.

3.2 Those who knew a little

There were some additional common themes expressed by those who knew a little about animal use in science. In particular they expected vets to:

- speak for the animals who cannot speak for themselves, championing the animals' cause;
- treat animals kindly;
- see things from the animals' perspective;
- speak out when they see 'bad things';
- be able to 'make things better';
- have the dedication and authority to stop or prevent animals from suffering.

One person added that they hoped the vet "*would be approachable, readily available and would instil a thoughtful attitude in other staff.*"

3.2.1 A cautionary word

One issue to be aware of is that some people in this category had been influenced by websites from establishments explaining their use of animals and referring to veterinary care as a part of this. For example: [the University] "*also employs a group of trained vets who are specialised in caring for research animals. Their roles include advising researchers on topics such as designing the most ethical experiments, and the use of pain relief and anaesthesia. These vets are on call round-the-clock to provide emergency care to animals when needed.*"

This is, of course, all true, but given the popular mindset that the presence of a vet will 'make everything alright' for animals, in our view it is somewhat disingenuous for establishments and other organisations to use the attending vets to try to allay concerns about, or 'normalise' animal use.

3.3. Those who knew a lot

We have unashamedly based the category of those that knew a lot on the RSPCA's view! However, many of the points were also echoed by others working in the field including vets, animal technologists and other animal welfare organisations with whom we also discussed the issue.

The RSPCA has always supported and promoted the NVS role. In our view, the knowledge, expertise and experience of the NVS is absolutely crucial in influencing an establishment's culture:

- helping to prioritise animal welfare within science;
- providing knowledge and expertise in animal health and welfare and the 3Rs;
- setting standards nationally and internationally
- giving a well considered and independent opinion on ethical issues;
- supporting other Named Persons; and
- contributing to staff training and standards of competency.

These come together with the NVS's role in the Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB) which we see as crucial, as did the Home Office since the minimum AWERB membership set out in the Home Office Guidance requires "*at least one of an establishment's NVSs*".

3.3.1 Some concerns that cause conflict with expectations

The role and responsibilities of the NVS, as set out in the Home Office Guidance, deal with most of the RSPCA's expectations *provided* the Guidance is *stringently interpreted and implemented*. However, there is a problem in that nearly all the requirements are about *advising* on animal welfare and good practice for scientific procedures, whereas the Society, and we think the public, would *hope and expect* that the NVS would be able to *ensure* these things. This leads to concerns that conflict with expectations, since the problem with 'giving advice' is that people may not take it.

The key concerns in this respect that we have encountered during our work within the scientific community are:

- i. The NVS may not have the necessary support, authority, or sometimes experience, to challenge scientists (particularly senior ones) and prevent them 'going too far' - for example, with respect to the amount of instrumentation to monitor multiple parameters an animal is subjected to, or the length of time instrumented animals are kept.

- ii. There may be a 'cultural belief' that one cannot tell scientists what to do even when they are using poor or outdated techniques that negatively affect both animal welfare and science.
- iii. When the NVS is a vet in practice, he or she may have a different concept of what is 'normal' in a laboratory situation and may not be up to date with 3Rs related issues.
- iv. Internal politics, pressure of work and cost constraints may tie hands with respect to improving animal welfare and applying the 3Rs.
- v. There can be conflicts of interests between animal welfare and the interests of the establishment where animal welfare is, in reality, not going to be the highest priority. In some cases the interests of animal welfare may conflict with intellectual interests in the science or the demands of clients or funders.

We find these issues hard to accept and believe that the wider public would find it equally so. Points (i) and (ii) are particularly problematic. The ASPA requires suffering to be minimised, and implementing this should have priority over both 'tradition' and 'academic freedom'.

3.3.2 Resolving concerns and realising expectations

The above concerns need to be resolved if the expectations of the NVS role are to be realised. In our experience, resolution is most likely to be achieved in establishments where there is a good culture of care, all Named Persons are well supported and serious efforts have been made to engage scientists with animal welfare, the 3Rs, ethical issues and the Named Persons' roles. The AWERB clearly provides a good focus for developing this sort of culture - which is also one of its functions (see RSPCA/LASA 2015). There are other useful initiatives which help to raise awareness, for example: posters, induction packs and training focussing on 'know your NVS', or 'know your AWERB', so there is no excuse for not understanding the importance of the NVS and AWERB roles.

4. Concluding comments

We recognise that our search for information and discussions do not amount to a proper survey of public expectations of the NVS roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, we consider it can be concluded that the wider public has little or no knowledge of the presence, let alone the role, of the NVS in research facilities. It is therefore difficult to say categorically what people's expectations are. However, on the basis of their views of vets in general, they would probably expect the NVS to be the animals' advocate, to see things from the animals' perspective and to prevent or at least minimise suffering. We also suspect that if people knew more about animal research and testing and how it is regulated, their expectations would echo those of the RSPCA, with the emphasis on *ensuring* good welfare and good practice – not just *advising* on this – and they would want the NVS to ensure that animals are respected and well treated at all times. That would mean raising awareness and resolving the concerns detailed above, which we believe should be a priority for LAVA for the immediate future.

We leave you with some questions: what, in an ideal world, would you want the public to know about and expect of the NVS? And should you first find out what they *think* the NVS does and what they *expect* the NVS to do?

This directly relates to the Concordat on Openness, which raises another question: how will LAVA, which has signed up to this, be ensuring that it complies in full? The Concordat requires signatories to provide 'clear information about the nature of [their] own involvement with animal research'. This presents the opportunity (and a requirement!) to inform the public about the nature of the NVS's involvement. How, then, does LAVA see its involvement in the Concordat developing,

especially with respect to dealing with issues such as: the level of support and authority the NVS has in practice; advising on, versus ensuring, good animal welfare; and conflicts of interest in all senses; as well as minimising the risk of being used as part of a 'defence' of animal research? The Concordat also requires honesty about the harms to animals and limitations of research rather than simply focussing on its benefits. Vets are ideally placed to do this in our view.

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