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Final version as passed by the Assembly

Managing acute challenges to animal research facilities and their scientists

Animal-based research is a central aspect of modern biomedical science. It is one of the core approaches for scientific and medical progress. This is recognized by countries across Europe and beyond. Therefore these countries have passed animal protection laws that strike the balance between our responsibilities towards animals and the need to use them for medical and scientific progress. These laws reflect the broad consensus in the public that biomedical research with animals is necessary but that it should be done with the least harm to the animals.

It is a core task for biomedical researchers to explain to the public that modern animal research takes both of these responsibilities very seriously. This is achieved by pointing out the benefits of animal research as well as the care that is taken of research animals. Much has been done in the last years to increase this transparency approach to communicating about animal research from the scientific community with the public, politicians and regulatory agencies. This approach has resulted in some notable improvements in the public understanding and recognition of animal research.

Nevertheless a small but very vocal set of people opposes any use of animals for research. These organizations categorically deny the scientific importance of animal research and accuse animal researchers of mistreating research animals. The arguments put forward by these groups can easily be addressed in the context of the transparency approach mentioned above. Much more troubling for animal researchers and the public discourse in a democratic society are aggressive and sometimes criminal tactics of these groups, including the public targeting of individual researchers ('home visits', personal attacks in the press and the public), facility break-ins and animal lab/facility infiltrations.

Scientists, their institutions and scientific societies need to develop strategies to deal with such tactics.

Core issues in managing challenges to animal research of a scientist or an institution

- Be prepared
 - Prepare response material (beyond the publicly available material generated in the context of the transparency approach), including extensive video coverage of the animals (with time code in the picture) and legally relevant documents prepared for a formal investigation
 - Provide everybody in your lab with clear rules (and have them be part of their legal employment records) on how to report animal welfare issues and on scientific conduct. Make sure that there is appropriate training on these issues for all people involved.



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- Have up-to-date (!) electronic records of important health parameters of the animals (weight, results of blood samples, etc.) as well as all data that might be required during a formal investigation. To test your preparedness make sure to have a checklist of the types of documents that might be required of you and make sure that you have all of them in a compiled form for providing them on short notice.
- Have written reports of regular veterinary checkups
- Have outside experts evaluate your animal welfare and provide a written assessment
- Build your response network
 - Within your lab
 - Within your institution (leadership & press office, but make sure that ALL relevant departments of your organization are involved in planning, incl. legal and security departments, and make sure they realize their involvement in case of a challenge situation). Make sure that key people from your institution have personal knowledge about your animal facility and animal welfare.
 - With you local and national advocacy groups
 - Within your local scientific community
 - With your scientific organization and your funding organization
 - With the local police
 - With the local press
 - Setup a communication chain for response management
- What to do during an ongoing situation
 - Provide a fast media response
 - Update employees of your own institution

Resources

- Society of Neuroscience “Guidelines for Crisis Management”