

Conference Report

5th International Conference of the Basel Declaration Society

“Openness and Transparency: Building Trust in Animal Research”

14th – 15th February 2018 at swissnex in San Francisco

The BDS organized a two-day conference in collaboration with AMP (Americans for Medical Progress), FBR (Foundation for Biomedical Research) and NABR (National Association for Biomedical Research) to initiate a broad discussion on more openness and transparency on all issues concerning animal research. More than 100 participants from the U.S. and Europe attended the conference, who represented all major stakeholders including researchers (among them several Ph.D. students and postdoctoral fellows) and animal welfare officers from Universities and companies, University administrators and science communicators, representatives from advocacy groups and animal welfare organizations.

The conference was structured in plenary sessions, parallel workshops, a panel discussion, and a media training for interested participants. Presenters were selected to cover a variety of aspects surrounding the use of animals for research and the way these sensitive issues are communicated. For the foreseeable future researchers will need to rely animal models for basic research and the development of new therapies, which needs to be communicated using proactive, open and transparent strategies to raise awareness and trust with stakeholders and the general public. While research institutes are keen to publish scientific data, many are still reluctant to transparently communicate that research in animals was a key component of the scientific progress made. This is mostly due to an underlying, not substantiated fear that open and transparent communication may make the institutions and/or scientists a target of violent animal rights activists. Most speakers emphasized that a professional and transparent communication strategy rather results in the opposite and it has been shown that not communicating has adverse effects - i.e. an excellent and transparent communication strategy is essential. Ethical and moral aspects have to be discussed and project information has to be made available to interested parties. It is important to realize that the expectations of lay persons differ from the ones of scientists. Therefore, it is essential to identify and use communication strategies tailored to different target and age groups. During the conference, already existing national and international organization and initiatives dedicated to openness and transparency in animal research, and successful outreach activities and campaigns were discussed.



One outcome of the intense discussions during the meeting was that the participants agreed that a proactive, open and trustful strategy for the interactions with the general public has to be developed as is already in place at few select Universities in the USA. For example, websites should have easy accessible and clear information concerning the research with animals that is conducted. It is important to engage in an open and participatory dialog with the general public that should include activities tailored to the different target audiences such as students, schools, information and programs for journalists and the different sectors and ages of the general public including lay people.

All participants attended one of the four Workshops, which centered around the following topics with the aim to develop and finalize position papers dealing with: 1. Openness and transparency in animal research. 2. Outreach to students and general public. 3. Science communication and social networks. 4. Transparency and the 3Rs.

The major achievement of Workshop 1 (Openness and Transparency) was a draft concept and roadmap toward reaching an US Animal Research Openness Agreement (USAROA). The workshop and conference participants decided that a working group should be constituted that creates an initial draft of such an agreement. In their discussions, the workshop participants reflected on the input of different stakeholders with expertise on proactive openness in European countries such as the UK, Germany and Switzerland (Basel Declaration). Particular emphasis was given to develop proactive strategies to communicate about animal research and a dialog with the general public about animal research. Last but not least, the workshop participants identified potential academic and industrial (first) signatories for the USAROA.

Workshop 2 was centered around outreach and establishing an interactive dialogue with students and the general public to increase the understanding of the continued importance of animal research. The participants agreed that efforts to educate science teachers are important and that research involving animals must be openly discussed at science fairs and career days. In addition to animal research itself, the awareness concerning moral and ethical issues needs to be raised. Therefore, organizations like AALAS (American Association for Laboratory Animal Science) that are already active on these issues should be supported. It was suggested that the activities be evaluated and discussed within the concordat before the new programs start.

Workshop 3 on science communication and social networks concluded that the correct “use” of social media is challenging. One major issue is that information and sources are not always reliable and in many cases the information does not concur to standards of the scientific community. Therefore, the use of social media requires a rather different approach than using classical media. However, the use of social media is key to reaching out to the young generation. It was pointed out that students and young scientists should be involved in communication strategies that rely on social media. Again, openness and transparency was considered key to the successful proactive communication. In addition, the workshop participants made recommendations concerning the format of the statements and information that institutions should provide on their websites to increase trust in their animal research.

Workshop 4 centered on transparency and the 3R principles. The participants discussed strategies to improve and ultimately maximize the implementation of the 3R principles (refine, reduce, replace) into daily research practice. There is a need to better inform the research

community and stakeholders about the advantages and inherent limitations of implementing the 3Rs into daily animal research and welfare practice. There is an urgent need to improve the collaboration between the institutions and groups that work on implementing the 3R principles and technologies in the USA and around the world. This is an area where academia and industry should work together and platforms and channels for sharing 3R knowledge and technology have to be established. It was mentioned that the 3Rs principles (formulated ≥ 60 years ago) should be up-dated to reflect the progress in animal research and welfare standards.

The conference ended with a vivid panel discussion on the second day and there was an overwhelming consensus among the panelists and participants of the 5th BDS conference that a bigger community built on the already ongoing initiatives in USA would be highly beneficial to progress faster as is happening in Europe. This community should work toward increasing openness and transparency both in the academic and industrial sector by influencing their leaderships. Efforts to encourage and increase proactive and positive communication of animal research, animal welfare and the 3Rs should be supported at all levels.



A major indicator of the success of the 5th BDS conference were the lively and completely open discussions among all participants. The feedback of the participants concerning conference organization, the swissnex venue, discussions and outcomes was overwhelmingly positive. The conference achieved its major goal, namely to lay the foundation toward an agreement to proactive openness and transparency in the USA that should be comparable to the Basel Declaration Society and the UK Concordat. In particular, the conference brought together the different stakeholders on this key issue and identified the interest groups that could act as driving force for this process. The BDS will stay in contact with the working group to support their efforts and progress toward an US Animal Research Openness Agreement (USAROA).

Additional information

The major outcomes of the conference were summarized in a [press release](#)

PDFs of most presentations are available for download at the [BDS website](#).

The policy papers of the four workshops can be downloaded [here](#).

An excellent summary of the presentations during the conference is also available from the following [external source](#).