



31 July 2015

Ms Trish Carling
Senior Research Officer
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

Email: trish.carling@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Carling and the Senate Committee,

Re: Voice for Animals (Independent Office of Animal Welfare) Bill 2015

Thank you for inviting Humane Research Australia (HRA) to provide a submission to the Committee's inquiry in relation to the above Bill.

HRA is a not for profit organisation that challenges the use of animal experiments and promotes more humane and scientifically valid non-animal methods of research. Our submission therefore relates to the use of animals in research and teaching.

Australia is the fourth largest user of animals in research, behind only China, Japan and the United States. It is a very controversial issue due to the inefficacy of extrapolating data from animals to human patients. If, however, we are to have an open and honest debate about the use of animals in medical research, then transparency and the exchange of information is essential. Obtaining such information can be extremely difficult. This is largely due to the various agencies and state departments which oversee animal experimentation in Australia.

Issues pertaining to the welfare of animals and the issuing of licenses to scientific establishments fall under the auspices of the relevant state department. Much of the funding for medical research – which often involves animals – is governed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). The NHMRC is focused on human health benefit and this is a conflict of interest when we consider the use of animals in that research.

The following issues are those we consider would be better placed if governed by a central/national office rather than left to individual states and territories:

Collection of statistics

Australia maintains no national collection or collation of animal use statistics, unlike many other countries. Even at state/territory level, there are 5-year delays in reporting, extremely inconsistent

collection and reporting methods between jurisdictions and institutions, and some states and territories don't even collect statistics at all.

The lack of statistics collation at a national level, and even at state/territory level, means that the 3Rs principles (Refining, Reducing, and Replacing animal use in research), or any other national policies that aim to limit the use of animals in research and teaching, are very difficult to implement, given that there is no accurate way of measuring change.

Transparency of research

Obtaining information about what actually happens to animals in research can be a difficult and frustrating process. Questions to the funding bodies are usually redirected to the state or territory departments responsible for animal welfare; and the state departments usually refer you back to the funding body – often the NHMRC. Requests for information – minutes of Animal Ethics Committee meetings, annual reports - are denied, and straightforward requests such as statistics are at best “difficult” to obtain and do not provide an accurate account of the purpose for which the animals are used.

If you question a company or institution about their use of animals their standard response is that all animal use has been considered and approved by an Animal Ethics Committee, and that they adhere to strict animal welfare legislation. Our investigations suggest otherwise.

A 2013 opinion poll commissioned by Humane Research Australia, found 57% of respondents were not even aware animals are used in experimental research in Australia.

Those opposed to animal research have an obvious interest in more disclosure. They believe that if the public were adequately informed, there would be more pressure to stop or minimise it. But so arguably do those who see a need for such research and are concerned about the respect for animal welfare in laboratories.

Greater transparency is also supported by significant voices on the research side. More information, it's argued, would dispel some of the inaccuracies about research coming from animal advocates. It would also help educate the public about what are seen by many in the biomedical community as significant benefits to humans.

But while it may be that all sides of the animal research debate desire transparency, Australia remains behind, making minimal effort towards openness, better communication, greater accountability and more public access to information.

The European Union have addressed such concerns and Article 43.3 Directive 2010/63/EU now requires that non-technical summaries (NTS) are published by the European Member States in order to provide the public with access to information concerning projects using live animals.

NTS must include title, purpose, objectives and benefits, number and type of animals, predicted harms and application of the 3Rs (Reduction, Refinement & Replacement). They must be written in non-scientific language and accessible for five years.

Certain projects (including those which use non-human primates) must also undergo a retrospective analysis – a powerful tool to facilitate critical review of the use of animals. It is believed that this

facilitates improved design for similar studies, raises openness of best practice and prevents mistakes.

NTS are compulsory from 2013 and they are considered to make a significant contribution to transparency.

Australia has a long way to go in giving laboratory animals a better deal – lifting the veil of secrecy, by following in the EU's footsteps - should be the first step, and implementation of such requirements could only succeed if addressed on a national level.

Consistency in decision-making and approval of protocols

Animal experimentation is a self-regulated industry. Decisions are made by an Animal Ethics Committee attached to the particular institution. The presence of animal ethics committees, and in particular inclusion of a category C member (animal welfare representative), is often used by researchers to promote a 'clean' image of the research industry to the public - as an assurance that the care and use of animals is sanctioned by those with a concern for their welfare and/or rights.

There are many pitfalls in the current system.

- There is no requirement for animal welfare representatives to have the necessary qualifications to challenge the justification of animal use.
- There is over-reliance on researchers to have explored all possible alternatives to animal use.
- There is no central record of animal experiments (and sharing of unpublished information) meaning there is likely to be widespread repetition.
- There is inconsistency of decision-making between institutional committees.
- There is too much pressure on AECs to approve protocols in order to secure funding.

A radical overhaul is long overdue – a centralization of the decision-making process in order to avoid repetition of experiments, ensure for consistency and to guarantee that decisions are made based on expert knowledge of the alternatives available and the ethics of whether the experiment is even justified in the first place.

Rehoming of ex-laboratory animals

For those animals unfortunate to be caught in the research industry, there is very rarely a happy ending. If the experiments they are subjected to don't kill them, then they are often "disposed of" by a lethal dose of barbiturate.

Last year the Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes was updated and the following clause was inserted:

"Opportunities to rehome animals should be considered wherever possible, especially when the impact of the project or activity on the wellbeing of the animal has been minimal and their physiological condition and behavioural attributes indicate that they can be introduced to a new environment with minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing."

Excerpt from Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. (Page 67, Clause 3.4.2)

The clause however, does not have any legal standing in that the Animal Ethics Committee need only consider rehoming. There is no legal requirement for them to do so.

The Beagle Freedom Bill has been passed in three states of the U.S. meaning that all tax-payer funded labs must offer their dogs and cats up for adoption through animal rescue organizations instead of just summarily killing (as is the standard operating procedure). It would be advantageous to introduce similar legislation within Australia however to do so under the current system would require separate legislative reforms under each state/territory jurisdiction.

Lobbying for legislative change is itself a difficult and onerous process. It is even more difficult when those we seek to represent cannot speak out for themselves. The fact that we need to lobby such a vast array of government departments – some with a conflict of interest – makes a difficult task even moreso.

Humane Research Australia therefore considers the establishment of a national office to be essential in order for each of these issues to be urgently addressed.

Thank you again for allowing us this opportunity and of course let us know if we are able to provide any further information.

Yours sincerely,
Helen Marston
CEO, Humane Research Australia