

The role of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) in the development of international standards for laboratory animal welfare

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Abstract

The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) is a Paris-based inter-governmental body formed in 1924 with the objective of improving transparency and international collaboration in the control of serious epizootic animal diseases. At the time of publication the OIE has 170 Members.

The formation in 1995 of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) saw the recognition of the OIE as the reference international normative organization for animal health and zoonotic diseases. In 2001 the OIE Member Countries agreed to expand the OIE's historical mandate to include animal welfare. The publication in 2005 of OIE standards for the transport, slaughter and killing of livestock for the purpose of disease control was a benchmark in the development of international animal welfare norms. As for all OIE standards, the Guidelines are based on science and take full account of the differing ethical, cultural, religious and political contexts of OIE Members.

A Permanent Animal Welfare Working Group (PAWWG), supported by expert groups convened to address specific subjects, develops the basic scientific texts. Members of groups are selected for their knowledge and experience and to be broadly representative of the five OIE regions. They do not speak for particular countries or organizations; rather they present scientific information. In addition to its collaboration with national Veterinary Services, the OIE draws upon non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including academia, the research community, industry and animal welfare NGOs.

OIE Members asked the OIE to develop standards for laboratory animal welfare in 2005. Since this time the OIE has held meetings with representatives of the International Council for Laboratory Animal Science (ICLAS) and allied organizations and is developing a framework for collaboration with experts in laboratory animal science. This paper presents the OIE Guiding Principles for Animal Welfare and important considerations in regard to standard setting for laboratory animal welfare.

Keywords: OIE, ICLAS, international harmonisation

Introduction

The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) is a Paris-based inter-governmental body that has the objective of improving transparency and international collaboration in the control of serious epizootic animal diseases. The OIE is responsible for setting international animal health and welfare standards, which cover, *inter alia*, disease diagnosis, reporting and management, health measures for international trade in animals and animal products, and standards for the humane transport and slaughter of animals. The paper describes the mission, operating procedures and work program of the OIE in animal welfare with a focus on the work of the OIE in establishing international standards for the welfare of laboratory animals.

OIE background

The OIE is an inter-governmental organisation created in 1924 in an effort to control animal diseases in Europe. The countries recognised the need to work together to prevent the spread of serious animal diseases that are not limited by international borders. Older than the United Nations (UN), the OIE remains outside the UN family but works in close collaboration with UN organisations, especially the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), that share some of the OIE's priorities.

The OIE mandate still emphasises prevention of the global spread of diseases, particularly trans-boundary diseases, but the mandate and mission of the OIE have broadened considerably. Animal welfare

has been identified as a strategic priority since 2001. The OIE took steps to raise awareness of its animal welfare standard –setting work in 2004 with a Global Conference on Animal Welfare (see published proceedings at: http://www.oie.int/eng/Welfare_2004/proceedings.pdf).

The OIE Strategic Plan 2006-2010 identifies the OIE mandate as 'the improvement of animal health globally'; the global fight against poverty is one of the main drivers of OIE activities. The OIE aims to help alleviate poverty through the following activities: improving public health by fighting zoonotic diseases; improving the sanitary safety of international trade; facilitating access to regional and international markets; encouraging national Veterinary Services to apply the rules established by the OIE for safe trade; and promoting animal welfare through animal health and the adoption of international rules.

At the time of writing, the OIE has 170 Members grouped in five regions, with 29 countries in the Americas; 51 in Africa, 50 in Europe, 13 in the

Middle East and 27 in Asia and Oceania. The OIE International Standards relevant to terrestrial animal health and welfare are presented in the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* (the Code), which is updated at the OIE General Session held annually in May. Texts are drafted by expert groups for potential inclusion in the Code and are officially adopted by the Delegates, meeting in plenary as the International Committee at the OIE General Session. This procedure is the sole pathway for the establishment of OIE standards (see Fig. 1).

As the normative publication on standards for international trade in animals and their products, the Terrestrial Code has legal force for World Trade Organisation (WTO) Member countries. Animal welfare guidelines are not covered by the WTO Agreement dealing with health (sanitary) standards but their inclusion in the Terrestrial Code provides an international benchmark for OIE Members and many OIE Members use them as references in negotiating bilateral and multilateral agreements on international



Fig. 1. The OIE Standard-Setting Procedure

trade.

The animal welfare work program of the OIE is coordinated by the Permanent Animal Welfare Working Group (PAWWG), whose mission statement is "To provide international leadership in animal welfare through the development of science-based standards and guidelines, provision of expert advice and the promotion of relevant education and research." Members of the PAWWG are selected for their expertise and to be broadly representative of the five OIE regions. Members are drawn from government, academia, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international industry organizations. To date, the industry members and observers in the PAWWG are from organisations dealing with farm animals rather than laboratory animals.

Under the auspices of the PAWWG, *ad hoc* Groups are convened to develop texts on specific topics as the basis for OIE standards. Members are drawn from government, academia, government and the private sector, including organisations that have a formal agreement with the OIE. In addition to several industry organisations, the OIE has or is developing formal agreements with the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), the International Council for Laboratory Animal Science (ICLAS) and the International Federation for Animal Health (IFAH), all of which are organisations that take a keen interest in laboratory animals.

The proposed OIE/ICLAS Agreement is of particular relevance to laboratory animal welfare. The text of the agreement notes the common interests of the two organisations and recognises the benefit of cooperation in the development and revision of international animal welfare standards and guidelines. Objectives identified in the text include 'promoting high standards of animal care and use in education, research, testing, and diagnostic work; advocating the role and responsibilities of the veterinary profession, and building relationships between private veterinarians and the governmental veterinary organisations in regard to laboratory animal welfare'.

The Programme for International Cooperation on the Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Registration of Veterinary Medicinal Products (VICH) established under OIE auspices is another important area of collaboration. A goal of the VICH is to facilitate regulatory acceptance and adoption of non-animal test methods that are internationally validated, an objective that can contribute significantly towards the achievement of Russell and Burch's '3 Rs'.

Achievements in the development of international animal welfare standards

In 2005 the OIE published a special edition of its Scientific and Technical Review series entitled *Animal*

Welfare: Global Issues, Trends and Challenges. This publication draws together review articles and discussion papers on key animal welfare topics. Of particular relevance to laboratory animal welfare are articles on 'Science Based Assessment of the Welfare of Laboratory Animals' by Dr V. Baumanns and 'Using Animals in Research, Testing and Teaching' by Dr C. Gauthier and Dr G. Griffin.

Relevant information, including how to order this publication, may be found at: http://www.oie.int/eng/publicat/rt/A_RT24_2.htm.

In May 2003 the International Committee adopted a set of general principles that establish, for OIE Members, a context and framework for the development of animal welfare standards. Those of greatest relevance to laboratory animal welfare include:

- there is a critical relationship between animal health and animal welfare;
- the internationally recognised 'three Rs' provide valuable guidance for the use of animals in science;
- the scientific assessment of animal welfare involves diverse elements, which need to be considered together and that selecting and weighing these elements often involves value-based assumptions that should be made as explicit as possible;
- the use of animals carries an ethical responsibility to ensure the welfare of such animals to the greatest extent practicable;
- equivalent outcomes (performance criteria) rather than identical systems (design criteria) should be the basis for comparison of animal welfare standards.

The OIE approach to the development of laboratory animal welfare standards

At its September 2007 meeting the PAWWG will finalise a discussion paper with recommendations on the OIE approach to laboratory animal welfare. These recommendations will be considered by the Terrestrial Animal Health Standards Commission (TAHSC), which is responsible for the Code, later that month. Taking into account the recommendations of the PAWWG and the TAHSC, an *ad hoc* Group will meet in December to commence the development of standards, starting with the elaboration of general principles for laboratory animal welfare standards. Experts participating in this group will be selected for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to laboratory animal science and welfare. The membership of the Group will include experts from all five OIE regions and both government and private sector experts.

The development of standards for laboratory animal welfare will follow the established approach

to standard-setting. The OIE procedures for the adoption of standards are open and democratic and it is important that texts be broadly applicable to all OIE Members, taking into account their diverse socio-economic, cultural and religious contexts. As already mentioned, the OIE normally develops 'Guiding Principles' as a starting point for more specific texts. It is important to note that the OIE adopts an 'outcomes-based' approach, whereby the goal is to improve the outcome – in this case the welfare of the animals - rather than a 'systems-based' approach (e.g. to prescribe the type of handling or treatment that should be applied in every case). It goes without saying that clarity and objectivity in defining the outcomes is an important consideration.

All draft texts are routinely made available to countries and to the general public via the OIE Internet site (www.oie.int). Key publications in this respect are the reports of the Code Commission meetings (published about 6 weeks after the September and March meetings) and the report of the General Session (normally published in July each year).

All official reports are published in English, French and Spanish, the three official languages of the OIE. Governmental Veterinary Authorities and other organisations may submit comments on draft text. The OIE places greatest weight on comments of OIE Members and encourages all commentators to submit their comments via the National Delegate to the OIE. The names and contact details for Delegates may be found on the OIE internet site at http://www.oie.int/fr/OIE/PM/fr_PM.htm?e1d1

Conclusions

As the organisation responsible for the establishment of animal health and animal welfare standards internationally, the OIE is uniquely placed to address the topic of international welfare standards for laboratory animals. The OIE will follow its usual approach, building standards upon science and collaborating with experts in the field. Through the collaboration established with other international organisations the OIE will aim to develop standards that are applicable to all its Members. Adoption of these standards should have a significant positive impact on laboratory animal welfare globally.

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