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Surgical training using live animals: can it be justified?

Larry Covelli braced himself when he saw Jim Moroski walking toward him. Moroski found a reason to argue with everything—from how the IACUC should be run to the color of the sky. This time Moroski wanted to talk about his surgery course.

“You know, Larry,” Moroski said, “some of my colleagues and I have developed a new method of teaching surgery to medical residents that is going to dramatically reduce the time they need to spend in their general surgical residency. We’re going to use dogs and pigs and get this program going in a few weeks. Do you think you can push it through the IACUC?”

“Slow down, Jim,” said Covelli. “We haven’t used animals for surgery training in more years than I can remember, and I don’t think it’s a change in policy that would happen overnight. Furthermore, it’s a school policy, not my policy.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Moroski replied, “but we’ve already had surgery faculty meetings about this and everybody agrees we can shorten the residency by a full year. Sally Nuñez supports this and said the Dean gave it the go ahead at this morning’s Chairs meeting, assuming it got through the IACUC. If we could cut the residency by a year we’d be way ahead of the curve and we’ll attract some of the best residents. It’s also going to revolutionize basic surgical training, so this is important stuff.”

“It’s also a major political hot potato, whether the Dean supports it or not, and you know that Jim,” countered Covelli. “There’s no way I’m going to push this through the IACUC and there’s no way I’m even going to put this on the agenda until I talk with the Dean. And if he does support this, you’re going to have to be

there to describe—in great detail—why the existing training for surgeons isn’t enough.”

Two weeks later Moroski met with the IACUC and explained his protocol. Deep down, Covelli didn’t want the application to pass, but the Committee seemed enthusiastic. For his part, Covelli argued to little effect that most other medical schools did not have a live-animal basic surgical training course, that if the proposal passed it would be a public relations disaster for the school, and that there was no ‘market research’ to see if other schools would consider cutting their residencies or use the proposed surgical training program.

What do you think? Should Covelli go over the Dean’s head? If the proposed protocol is approved and the training program lives up to its promise, would this vindicate the decision of the IACUC?

RESPONSE

IACUC’s authority

Joana Visa, PhD, DVM & Marga Nadal, PhD

Moroski seems to lack a clear understanding of the IACUC’s authority and operational guidelines.

The IACUC derives its authority from the law; the Committee is mandated by the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), which requires the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organization to appoint the IACUC. Once appointed, the IACUC reports to a senior administrator known as the Institutional Official. The IACUC’s authority to review and approve protocols is independent of the IO or CEO, neither of whom may overrule an IACUC decision to withhold approval of a protocol¹. Further, only the IACUC (not

the IO or the Dean) can review, approve, request modifications to, or withhold approval for animal protocols.

If an investigator attempts to use the Dean’s opinion as pressure to approve his procedure, the IACUC must respond with professionalism and ask him to provide all the information necessary to fairly evaluate the protocol (in this case, the use of animals in surgical training).

Moroski needs to understand the IACUC’s review process. The logical order is to present the documentation to the IACUC and then allow the investigators to defend their proposal. The members of the IACUC should not start to evaluate the suitability of a protocol with the Dean or with any other external person. Once the protocol has been approved or rejected, it is the responsibility of each member of the IACUC to accept the decision of the majority.

In the particular case of animal use for surgery training, the IACUC must review in detail the species to be used, the training of the personnel, the facility requirements, the post-surgical requirements, and the personnel health and safety needs. In addition, the IACUC needs to consider alternative methods.

In summary, it is necessary to inform the investigators about the IACUC’s authority and to tell the members of the organization about the operational guidelines of the IACUC. Ultimately, the IACUC must be impervious to external pressure to guarantee that the decisions it makes are ethical and fair.

1. ARENA/OLAW. *Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee Guidebook*, 2nd edn. (Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, Bethesda, MD, 2002).

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