
Transparency and communication: Good Practice in Animal Research Communication

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Abstract

The general public shows strong reservations towards animal research. Over the years, science has also critically looked at e.g. reproducibility and translational issues and implemented improvements of which the public is not always aware. In addition, the relation between (some) animal experiments and human health is not always understood by the critical community. Due to aggressive actions towards some research establishments, communication about animal experiments has not always been the obvious answer. On the other hand, examples have shown, that transparency and openness lead to better understanding of the public about the why of animal experiments, but also about the strict regulations under which animal experiments have to be performed. In most cases where an open communication with the general public has become a fundamental policy, some understanding and a dialogue, also with the more extreme NGO's, replaced aggressiveness towards scientists. This article proposes several activities with respect to communication about animal experiments for public institutes and universities. One of these is that a group of experts should be established, with different backgrounds with respect to animal experiments and communication skills. The establishment of an Animal Experiments Communication Group has shown to be crucial for appropriate communication in different situations. Activities focussed on different communication strategies are discussed. Crucial in all of this is the each establishment has developed a clear policy on animal experiments, which is also shared with the outside world. A well-designed strategy should be the basis for effective communication to different groups under different situations. Furthermore, dedicated webpages providing information on the institute's policy with regard to animal experiments, as well as specific information on animal experiments (among which annual statistics) will lead to improved openness and transparency.

Keywords: animal research, communication, public opinion

Introduction

The general public critically perceives animal research. The public is generally informed about this topic by anti-vivisection and animal welfare organisations, giving a biased view on current animal experiment practices. Transparent communication by the academic institutions about the why and how of currently performed animal experiments might lead to a better understanding of the public and more trust in biomedical research.

The aim of this review is to help communication, research and management professionals to develop a strategy for communication concerning the use of animals in research. The goal is to design key messages, establish communication strategies, identify the internal experts to handle crisis managing and to share good communication schemes in a university. This in turn will generate a long term and proactive communication strategy and support confidence and trust in the life science sector with reference to the transparent information about the use of animals in research.

Animal research and public communication

Animal research has been crucial in many medical breakthroughs and provides indispensable information to researchers and physicians regarding living organisms, understanding diseases and discovering new treatments.

The 2010 Eurobarometer poll on Science and Technology showed that European citizens' opinion of the necessity of using animals in research is divided. This is in a large part caused by an imbalance in the information about animal research: the scientific community has failed to convince the public about the importance of animal research, the strict conditions under which these are allowed, and various associations that oppose animal research have gained ground in Europe, influencing not only public opinion but potentially also decision makers.

In another public opinion polling, animal research has been perceived to be "secretive" (IPSOS survey UK, 2018) about its work. The failure to publish information on animal research can indeed leave an institution open to this accusation. When such "secrets" have been exposed, experience shows how activists have been given the opportunity to inflict considerable reputational damage on researchers, institutions and the biomedical sector.

At the European level, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Stop Vivisection" was able to influence discussions about animal research in a quite one-sided manner. The European Commission's communication response to the ECI in 2015 made a clear call for all institutes and universities to provide more information and commit to better explanations about animal research to the public.

Over the years, the scientific community started to realise the reservations of the public towards animal experiments. More importantly it is realised that animal experiments, when not performed according to current standards, do not give reliable and translatable results. The concept of the 3Rs (Replacement, Reduction and refinement of animal experiments) is therefore now leading when setting up animal experiments. In addition, initiatives as the Prepare guidelines, to better setup animal experiments, and the Arrive guidelines, to improve reporting data from animal experiments, as well as more attention to experimental design and systematic reviews, might lead to more reliable and translatable research. In addition these may lead to a reduction of unnecessary animal experiments.

Communication to the public on the importance of animal research, and the carefulness it is often practiced, is an important way of increasing understanding and awareness of the work of the biomedical sector and how the 3Rs (Reduce, Replace, Refine) and other initiatives are being implemented. A proactive communication strategy also puts animal research in context, as a necessary part of basic and clinical research with benefits to both humans and animals.

In November 2017, EU review of Directive 2010/63/EU introduced a number of elements aiming at improving transparency. For example, the majority of Member States and users were of the opinion that the requirements in the Directive for publication of non-technical project summaries and annual statistical data of the research using animals have positively contributed to transparency, although the full impact has yet to be realized. Transparency is essential to develop a trust in that the stipulations and conventions in the care and use of animals in science are also the basis for public support of continued research using animals, until such time their use can be replaced by non-animal alternatives (Section 3 of EU review of Directive 2010/63/EU – Improved Transparency).

Initiatives such as The Concordat on Animal Research in the UK, Spain and Portugal, ratified by institutions involved, have shown that a proactive communication policy and transparency concerning animal research which is shared with institutions involved can support to

gain credibility from the general public. The Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK was launched in 2014. The large number of Concordat signatories (117 signatories) ensures that working on openness on animal research in the UK is seen as the norm rather the exception..

Recently, Swiss universities, academies and other stakeholders have started a process of developing a transparency agreement, to be finalized in December 2019. In 2018, the Swiss universities conference of public relations and information officers (SUPRIO) published a document titled ‘Good Practice in animal experimentation communication’.

Communication Strategy and Recommendations

A. Target Audience

1. Internal Communication responsibilities

Trustful and reliable communication about animal experiments start with persons that are skilled in communication and at the same time have knowledge about the field, and related concerns. Valuable statements start with knowledgeable, trustworthy people trained in animal research communication. The forming of an animal research communication group (ARCG) can implement the development of communication strategies.

The ARCG is preferably composed of:

- A named responsible group leader
- The media officers or communication department
- The university management staff (e.g. for political and/or superior topics)
- Researchers who work with animal models
- A representative of the animal research ethics committee
- The animal facility managers, delegates from the animal welfare body and the animal research director (part of the university management in most cases)

The ARCG should meet at regular intervals to discuss the strategy and progress of animal research communication and to develop crisis and response plans. Furthermore, it should have provisions in place that allow members of the group to be quickly informed about acute situations by using SMS or a specific WhatsApp group.

It is very important to inform also staff not directly being involved in animal research to inform about legislation that regulates animal research, the scientific projects and procedures. Organizing workshops, lectures and round-tables, visits to the animal facilities, using existing channels of communication (University annual report for animal research and newsletter) are good ways to communicate about animal research in your University.

To develop an efficient communication strategy it can be helpful to set up a process to follow:

- Identify a lead or a contact person for animal research issues (member of Animal research expert communication group): a designated spokesperson or scientist able to talk about research using animals.
- Consider if staff involved in animal research can handle queries themselves and decide when your staff should not respond to a question. The staff should know where to go for information and what the policies are.
- Preferably before each outside contact, inform the ARCG and discuss the appropriate communication strategy. Preferably all outside contacts are done by the dedicated spokesperson(s).

- Ensure that staff not directly being involved in animal research knows what to do if asked about the subject someone from public.
- Ensure that all staff know what communication resources and support are available in your University.
- Remind all departments that use of animals for research are regularly updated with any news (any unexpected events, research findings, including case studies illustrating how and why you support research-using animals).

2. External communication

a). Press contacts: develop guidelines for dealing with journalists

We can identify active and reactive press contacts. Active press contacts include press releases to inform about situations that you would like to share with the community, or that are a reaction to an actual situation. Other press contacts involve those like invited interviews for newspaper, radio or television.

To be clear, ensure that media reports on animal experiments are as balanced and as fair as possible (invest in briefing the journalist profoundly, demand right to check/clear direct/indirect quotes, etc.). In order to create as much transparency as possible, define rules for visiting animal husbandries/animal procedures and for producing images: What is possible, Why not? (e.g., interview with project leader: yes, visiting labs: no, because the animals get disturbed and the experiment gets influenced). These rules can be harmonized with other LERU Universities (in order to be consistent).

Ideally, press contacts are done by the dedicated spokesperson(s) in the ARCG, to ensure one common message. In case other persons are invited for a press contact, these people should be well informed about what to communicate by members of the ARCG and be aware of the institute's policy on animal experiments. It is always possible to ask for a response time (of about 30 mins), in which the ARCG can be contacted and give advice.

b). Social media

When dealing with social media, their needs to be an effective dialogue regarding sensitive and controversially debated issues like animal experimentation. The respective Universities should define strategies for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. This should include how to engage in (or avoid) discussions, how to prevent/deal with crisis communication, etc. A dedicated person following activities on social media is recommended.

c). Active community outreach

Active community outreach is an important activity to inform the community about animal experiments. Encourage the scientists to give talks in schools: the local research community should showcase how and why they use animals in their research and what the benefits are. Animal technicians often give a very positive impression on school children because they can talk about how they care for the animals themselves and discuss the career options that are available within the industry.

d). Politicians and regulators

Politicians (local, regional and national) could be very useful supporters when the media ask to them for comments, or when discussions about animal experiments take place in parliament. Provide general information about research and its benefits, and if possible build a trusting relationship with the politicians as well. Make sure, by personally established contacts, by either

the spokespersons or the university's lobbyist, that politicians know whom to address for information on experimental animal topics.

e). Professional stakeholders (Research funders, Professional associations, Industry partners and others Research Institutes and Universities)

Some professional stakeholders can offer you support and guidance, and it is very important to talk with colleagues in other research Institutes and Universities concerning any openness measures. Research funders and patient associations may want to know about your research and its benefits, the policies and practices when you use animal models, and it is very important to align communication regarding these issues.

f). NGO's

Start a dialogue with organisations that oppose animal experiments. Although it will never lead to an agreement, it gives control over information that you can supply, and will give opportunities to communicate activities that lead to, for instance, improved animal welfare. It certainly avoids aggressive actions due to a lack of transparency.

B. University website on animal experimentation

By surveying the openness of 1,219 websites of biomedical research establishments across the EU, the conclusion of EARA (European Animal Research Association) is that the sector is still away from an acceptable level of openness and transparency in animal research (EARA study of EU-websites 2018).

Institutional websites could be a great tool for informing the public, media, decision makers and regulators about the use of animals in research and the contribution of animal research to biomedical science. They also provide evidence of the importance of animal welfare to the life sciences and can highlight the significance of the 3Rs.

The website of each university should include an area which provides the institutional policies (position statement) with regard to animal experiments: why does this institution perform animal experiments and under which conditions. Furthermore, information about animal experimentation could be shown, ideally also showing specific project examples.

The more relevant information is provided on the institutional website, the easier it will be to respond to people's questions or for them to find the answers. The best animal research webpages (EARA, 2018) include: frequently asked questions (FAQs), a position statement, the number of animals used, case studies, images and videos.

1. Position statements

Providing a statement on the institutional website shows that the institute is open about animal research. It tells the research funders and the public why, when and how animals for biomedical research are used and is an opportunity to explain the high standards of animal welfare that this research must meet.

Make sure the university has a clear online statement and put the statement on an easy-to-find page on the website. Remember, some people will search "animal experiments" or "animal testing", as well as "animal research".

A good animal research statement can include:

- Your University supports animal research under certain conditions.
- Why animal research is sometimes necessary and its benefits.

Further information could include:

- The laws and the regulation (European and national levels).

- Ethical review policies.
- Annual statistics on the use of experimental animals, including explanation of the figures.
- Explanation of the 3Rs principle and implementation.
- Awareness of the dilemma's that are involved in animal experimentation.

2. *FAQs*

Answers to frequently asked questions can provide information not just about the use, but also about the limitations, of animal research. The FAQs can be useful for public and social media communication. The following FAQs are the most common:

- Why are animals used in research? Who uses animals in research?
- Is animal research necessary? How can results derived from animal research be extrapolated to humans?
- Has animal research contributed to medicine? Are there alternatives to using animals in research and testing?
- How is animal research regulated? What are the 3Rs in animal research? What animals are used in research? How many animals are used in research?
- Aren't the animals in laboratories suffering and in pain? What happens to animals once an experiment is completed?
- Why are increasing numbers of animals scarified for research, especially for repetitive experiments? Do we really have the right to experiment on animals? What about theirs rights? Are pets and NHP stolen for research?

3. *Case studies*

A case study can help bring an issue to life with real-world examples. A case study can explain how and why animals were used in research and what this can help researchers find out. A case study can be like a short news story. A good case study may include:

- The basic research question/setup and the benefits for clinical research.
- The impact of the disease addressed (symptoms, number of people affected, etc.).
- Why animals were necessary.
- What the research involved: keep it simple, with no long, technical words or acronyms.
- Any specific steps taken by the researchers and technicians to reduce animal use or alleviate suffering.
- Information about the ethical review and how it is regulated.
- When and where the research happened, the more recent the better.

4. *High-resolution images and videos.*

Good, suitable, authentic visual material is crucial since we all are aware of "the power of images". Each university should build up a stock of professional pictures of the animal experimentation and the facilities at their institution, ideally also showing specific project examples. Remember that most members of the public are unfamiliar with lab equipment. The images and videos are a powerful way of providing an accurate representation of the research environment at your institution.

C. Campaigns, protests and crisis communication.

To prepare a crisis communication strategy, it is very important to recognise the level of risk to the reputation of your university and develop in advance a plan of action for each scenario. In general, inform the ARCG and communicate your position statement and the key messages of response, and contact your network and universities who have experienced similar situations.

1. Campaigns

Campaigns against Research Institutes and Universities from parties opposing animal research are becoming relatively rare. In the last 6 years, we have witnessed a number of campaigns against research centre and universities across Europe: Max Planck Institute (2015), University of Milan (2013), University of Cambridge (2014), Imperial College (2013), Free University Brussels, Brain & Spine Institute Paris (2017).

Campaigns may involve different scenarios: a protest outside of your university (animal facility), targeted at companies and organisations which the establishment may have links with, a large volume of letters, online petitions or a high-volume phone/emails that target individuals at a university, and even undercover infiltration.

Often, the journalists and activist organisations misrepresent the nature and purpose of scientific research involving animals, so it is very important to be prepared. How is responded will depend on time and resources. If you receive a large number of identical stock letters, you may wish to send a standard response to all. But it is worth remembering that online petitions often auto-create email by signatories and can result in thousands of mails being sent out. Some institutes choose to reply only to messages that have been personalised in some manner or to those from supporters. This is a valuable opportunity to communicate to people who care about why you perform research using animals and to correct any misinformation.

While it is not very common for anti-animal-research protests to target medical research institutes, it can be a (perfectly) legitimate and democratic way for individuals to express their opinion.

Universities that have experienced these types of actions might like to share their experiences and discuss those with their LERU colleagues.

2. Infiltrations

The curves of the number of attacks (material sabotage and other clandestine actions) indicate a change since 2007 that is less alarming than some publicized comments suggest; a downward trend is even observed, but remains to be confirmed. On the other hand, the emergent forms of direct actions (infiltrations, intrusions, occupation of premises), inspired by civil disobedience, are very likely to develop both numerically and in terms of the diversity of targets and processes employed (GIRCOR, France). Animal activist groups have set aside large amounts of money for “investigations”. The best defence, but also best reaction, against an infiltration is to be as open as possible. An infiltration can have a profound effect on staff wellbeing and trust.

In April 2013 for instance, The Sunday Times newspaper featured an infiltration by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (Cruelty Free International today), at Imperial College London. It claimed that staff breached welfare standards by mistreating laboratory animals. The quick and far-reaching response of the Imperial College to the undercover film is a very good example of how an institution should respond to an “investigation” that (indeed) reveals the need for improvements in training. In 2015 the Imperial College film – *Animal Research at Imperial College* – was released to coincide with the publication of their first Animal Research Annual Report, both revealing the high-quality research and animal welfare at the Imperial College.

Finally, it is very important to reflect and debrief all the actions after the crisis and assess how the ARCG, the staff and the researchers feel about the communication and the actions that were taken during the crisis.

Conclusions

A well prepared communication plan, informative website, and a pro-active Animal Research Communication Group, will lead to a better understanding of the general public and other stakeholders about the why and how's of animal experiments. Transparency and openness, instead of secrecy, have shown to increase the trust of the public in research in the life sciences involving animals, and reduce unforeseen aggressiveness towards the institution.

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