IACUCs and Personalities
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The Animal Welfare Regulations (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 9, Chapter 1, Subchapter A, Part 2, Subpart C, Sec. 2.31), the Public Health Service Policy on the Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Part IV.A.3 and Part IV.B., Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, National Institutes of Health), and the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Institute of Laboratory Animal Resources, National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1996, p 9–10) provide clear directives concerning the composition of an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) and its responsibilities. However the behaviors, emotions, and traits that go into the execution of its charge are as varied as the members who constitute it. I believe that these characteristics of the committee members and how they interact give each IACUC its own distinctive personality.

Over the past 18 years I’ve served as an attending veterinarian on 10 animal care and use committees including those assembled by medical schools, hospitals, private industry, undergraduate/graduate universities, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Their activity levels have ranged from a committee meeting two times per year and reviewing five to six protocols to one meeting monthly and reviewing several hundred protocols per year. The remarks that follow are observations and a perspective based upon my service on those committees.

Committee members can individually, or as a group, give an IACUC its identity. One member can exert so much influence on the committee that his/her personality becomes that of the IACUC. These overly influential members can impart their influence through a variety of means and frequently without intending to do so. It should be noted that the “influential” individual may not be the one who has explicit authority (i.e., not the chairperson). It may be someone who for other reasons is able to affect committee behavior to the point of conveying a personality to the group.

Personal characteristics of the member may contribute to this ability to influence. Individuals with commanding personalities (e.g., assertiveness) may simply dominate the behavior of the committee. They make their opinions known to the group and through verbal brawn or skillful articulation are able to convince others of the correctness of their position. It is incumbent upon the other members of the IACUC to make certain that their concerns and positions are adequately addressed to avoid having the IACUC identified by the dominant member’s personality.

Members with a keen “detail orientation” can convey that trait to the committee. In contrast to the individual who has influence by virtue of his/her own strength of personality, the “detail” member simply notices the small things that escape the rest of us and brings that detail to the committee’s attention. Take for example the semiannual inspection of the facility. The “detail” member spots the small spot of chipped paint or the slowly dripping faucet and believes that it should be included in the semiannual report, complete with a timeline for correction. Others may disagree about the significance of the observation, but may not wish to undermine the contribution of the “detail” member or diminish that person’s participation in the process. And so the observation is included in the report and the IACUC may be seen as overly picky.

The semiannual inspection is an opportunity to identify programmatic deficiencies, but there is not always agreement about what constitutes something of merit with respect to weaknesses. A large list of deficiencies, whether they are of a minor nature or not, conveys the idea that the program is not well managed and, by extension, that animal welfare may be in jeopardy. It is important that the committee members thoughtfully review the findings of evaluation subcommittees and formulate them into a meaningful report with recommendations to the Institutional Official (IO). To do less may undermine the credibility of the IACUC in the eyes of the IO and the research community.

Subject matter knowledge can impart influence to a committee member. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is seen in the attending veterinarian. The attending veterinarian’s knowledge of the regulations and policies governing research animal use combined with a familiarity with animal care, disease, and treatment tends to place the veterinarian in the position of being a recognized authority in “all things animal” in the eyes of other committee members. This “authority” status may lead to a stifling of discussion of important issues surrounding animal use simply because other members do not feel qualified to challenge the expert. The IACUC then takes on the personality of the attending veterinarian.

The scientist who is a key animal user may also impart influence through subject matter knowledge. Take for example the IACUC that has been convened by an institution in response to a first animal use project or by one that reviews few animal proposals. The scientist is not only the one who has the scientific background concerning the project, but also he or she is often the one who is most familiar with the animal use regulations and policies. In an effort to conduct the animal-based project, the scientist has had to gain familiarity with the regulatory framework surrounding research animal use. Other members may not have knowledge in this regard, and so the scientist becomes the relative expert. Again, there may be a reluctance to question the scientist by those less well informed. Each IACUC member has a responsibility to voice their concerns and raise questions regardless of their familiarity with the regulations or the project under consideration.

Members with subject matter knowledge can lead to a phenomenon of group dependence, complete with an “enabling” membership. Repeated examples of the expert nature of the member so endowed can disengage the other IACUC members such that there is little perceived need to delve into matters of concern. Over time the rest of the IACUC membership may become only too happy to depend upon the expert to guide them in their decisions. Critical review of animal use protocols and other IACUC business depends upon a fully contributing membership.

The persona of a committee can be influenced by someone who is not even a committee member. Consider the contact person for the committee, commonly known as the IACUC coordinator (IC). The IC is often the person who has the greatest amount of interaction with investigators as they seek to navigate the IACUC review process. If the individual filling this role is viewed by the investigative community as unhelpful, or even worse an obstructionist then the IACUC itself can become identified as such. At the very least, insensitive behavior on the part of the primary IACUC contact person can lead to a persona of the committee that may not be consistent with its personality.
The IC is a critically important public relations advocate for the IACUC. The person filling the IC role must be a creative problem solver with excellent communication skills and the ability to convey a sincere desire to help. This point person for the IACUC must be able to maintain adherence to institutional policies and procedures to avoid regulatory entanglements, and at the same time be perceived as facilitating the IACUC review process.

A scientist or group of scientists on the IACUC can convey to an IACUC a scientific focus to its review process and by so doing give something of a scientific trait to its personality. IACUCs with this trait place an emphasis on the review of the experimental design and the science of protocols. In some cases, the committee may encounter significant differences of opinion about what constitutes a proper design and have difficulty reaching a conclusion on how to handle a particular proposal. There seems to be variability in how committees view scientific merit and what is considered within the purview of the IACUC and what is not. The guidance offered by Prentice et al. (Scientific merit review: The role of the IACUC; Prentice ED, Crouse DA, Macho MD; ILAR News, Vol 34, numbers 1-2, p.15–19) is helpful but is not universally accepted (see Letters – More on IACUCs and Merit Review; Black J; ILAR News, Vol 35, number 1, p. 1–3).

The composition of a committee can be such that two equally influential, though contrasting personalities emerge. Take, for example, a committee comprised of representation from two different academic departments. Both may have strong animal-based research programs with long histories of federally funding, but markedly different animal needs. Their strongest connection may be that they belong to the same university. When representatives from the two departments get together at the meeting they bring with them the operational and animal use perspective that has been developed over time in their respective departments. The result can be differences of opinion about how proposals are to be reviewed, what issues are of greatest concern during protocol review and semiannual evaluation, and even the attitude toward the regulatory climate in which animal use is conducted. These different perspectives can lead to healthy discussions on matters presented before the IACUC. Final decisions are usually creative and well thought out because each party must critically examine its respective position to reach an agreement.

A less desirable split personality can result when unresolved differences of opinion exist among members of the IACUC. It is critically important that such conflicts be ironed out in committee deliberations before the matter is discussed with research investigators or a partial decision is presented to them regarding a protocol. A mixed message from the IACUC or its individual members only creates confusion and undermines credibility with research investigators.

In summary, several features come to mind in defining an IACUC with the potential to be effective. It must be properly constituted and engage in deliberations and evaluations that are characterized by a balanced contribution from all members. A knowledgeable IACUC coordinator who is perceived by the research community as helpful is a tremendous asset. The members should possess a thorough understanding of animal welfare and the regulations surrounding it, coupled with an appreciation for the needs of animal users. However, the realization of an IACUC’s full potential, including the ease or difficulty with which it is accomplished, depends upon the human element. This human component is determined by the personalities of the individual members of a committee and is presented to the research community in the form of an IACUC personality. Personality is about perception, and maximum IACUC effectiveness is achieved by a personality that is perceived as communicative, fair, consistent, and timely.

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