Where is the “institution” in your institutional animal care and use program?

Behold! The animal care and use Magician!

By Christian Newcomer, V.M.D.
Director of Laboratory Animal Medicine, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

One of the real benefits of serving years on the Council on Accreditation is the number of times one encounters talented animal care and use program directors, frequently laboratory animal veterinarians or other individuals in leadership positions, involved in the day-to-day operations of their programs. These individuals are performing admirably, contributing broadly, and have a good command of their institution's cooperative framework, allowing them to achieve a high-quality, continuously-accreditable animal care and use program.

In some cases however, a rare directorial phenotype emerges by malignant transformation—the Animal Care and Use Magician! The occurrence of these rare individuals is strongly associated with the institutional milieu and philosophy, and their fascinating efforts in diverse areas are pivotal to the success of the animal care and use program—they are often responsible for sustaining AAALAC accreditation.

What roles does the Magician play in the program? In short, all of them. The Magician is the sensor, logic, workhorse and conscience of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee; the colleague, advisor (and perhaps a collaborator) to investigators; the personnel trainer; the chief compliance officer and disciplinarian; the overseer of the veterinary and animal care operations; the coordinator for, and often the designer of, the occupational health and safety program for animal handlers; the liaison to other institutional committees on activities impacting animal care and use; and the public spokesperson on behalf of animal research issues.

Institutional officials don’t often recognize that relying on a single, highly capable individual creates a precarious short-term strategy for assuring a sound animal care and use program. In fact, institutional officials will often cite an analogy to the efficiency and convenience of “one-stop shopping,” noting that this approach not only reduces the number of personnel involved in the “largely bureaucratic matters” surrounding animal care and use—it also creates a smart, benign dictatorship that meets everyone’s needs.

AAALAC site visitors are more likely to view this type of system as a model of learned helplessness than resourcefulness.

But given that some AAALAC accredited programs have operated successfully in this mode, what specific problems or disadvantages does the one-stop shopping approach present? First and foremost, AAALAC International uses the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (NRC 1996) and other applicable documents to accredit programs, not individuals. The most stable and reliable indicator of continuing program success is an institutional configuration that fully engages the institutional official (or senior administration), the IACUC, and the program director as co-participants contributing to the development, oversight and implementation of the animal care and use program.

Over-investing authority and responsibility in one individual may be adequate in the short term. In the long-term, it is inherently unstable and creates many new program vulnerabilities. For example, over-committed and unrewarded faculty members on the IACUC may be happy to relinquish their IACUC responsibilities to an expert on the committee. But in doing so, they undermine the power of consensus, and dismantle the unified front in areas of controversy or institutional need.

The IACUC-appointed expert now has an opportunity to impose a particular viewpoint and set of values on the institution which may be successfully challenged during peer review or by the research community. The expert’s domination of the IACUC may give rise to complaints of favoritism or of biases against particular areas of research, approaches to research, or research personnel. It may also introduce personal factors into decisions which should remain unbiased and fact-based. A real or imagined lack of a level playing field by an institution’s scientific community can undermine the credibility of the IACUC—it can destroy an atmosphere of cooperation and create an environment of noncompliance.

There are other vulnerabilities for the institution and the Magician that have been recorded during AAALAC evaluations and should be recognized. The Magician may be subject to undue personal attack and criticism, may become injured, fatigued or disengaged on particular issues or areas of responsibility, and
may ultimately be used as a scapegoat for the institution’s problems.

From the institution’s perspective, the far-reaching responsibilities of this individual can have a detrimental impact on important aspects of the animal care and use program if he or she is performing below par. Perhaps even more important for the institution is what will happen if (and when) the individual chooses to leave the program. AAALAC has recorded many cases where this has happened and chaos has resulted because nobody in these institutions really knew how things worked, and the valued personal relationships and agreements that made things work had been dissolved. These programs faced long and difficult rebuilding periods to insert the “institution” back into their institutional animal care and use programs.

So go back and review the description I cited earlier that marks the Magician. If the description has a familiar ring, remember that magic is the skilled use of illusion ... which is only a few letters from delusion—poof!

Christian
Newcomer, V.M.D.,
is Director of
Laboratory Animal
Medicine for The
University of North
Carolina at Chapel
Hill, and vice
president of
AAALAC’s Council
on Accreditation

Connection online!

AAALAC’s Connection newsletter is now available on the World Wide Web. Connection online! features full text versions of stories, photos and graphics and can be found at http://www.aaalac.org/connect1.htm.

AAALAC on the road!

AAALAC recently participated in the annual meetings of the Society of Research Administrators, the Society for Neuroscience, and the National Council of University Research Administrators. AAALAC is also involved in several events at this month’s annual meeting of the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (see details on page five). Participation in the events is meant to encourage more institutions to exhibit excellence in animal care and use by applying for accreditation, and to provide information and updates to those that are already accredited.

Know any interesting animal facts or trivia?
Share them on AAALAC’s Web site!

The “AAALAC Animal Puzzler,” a weekly feature on AAALAC’s Web site, is one of the most popular pages on the entire site — but we’re running out of puzzlers and need your help! If you have an interesting animal fact or bit of trivia to share, send it via e-mail to lwieder@aaalac.org or fax it to 301-231-8282, and we’ll feature it on the Web site. We’ll also include your name and any other information (affiliation, e-mail address, etc.) you submit to us. Those selected will receive a modest (but heartfelt!) thank-you-for-participating gift.