

CHAPTER 11

ANIMAL HOUSE STAFF

Introduction

11.1 In earlier chapters of this report, the Committee drew attention to the increasing demand for higher quality animals for close definition of their genetic and health status in order to obtain reproducible data. This necessitates both good facilities and equipment and well trained staff. In this chapter the Committee discusses staff of animal houses and their training.

11.2 There are three basic levels of staff in animal houses: professional staff, technicians and attendants. The professional staff are veterinarians who, in most cases, are the directors of the animal houses. From the responses to the Committee's questionnaire, which covered the period 1980-84, in only nine animal houses of the 75 in non-Commonwealth institutions for which information was supplied, were veterinarians employed in this capacity. Few institutions had appointed a second veterinarian. The Committee is aware, however, that the number of veterinarians employed in institutions has increased in recent years.

11.3 The animal technicians form the key element of animal houses. In many institutions, a senior technician supervises the operations of the animal house. The technicians perform the more skilled jobs within the animal house and in many institutions carry out a range of routine experimental procedures.

11.4 The routine jobs within animal houses are carried out by animal attendants who may or may not have had training in animal care at colleges of technical and further education.

11.5 In the larger institutions, there are usually several animal breeding or holding units that function with some degree of administrative autonomy. Of the 98 separate units that had a staffing policy, 55 required formal qualifications or enrolment in appropriate courses as a condition of employment. Even in this group not all the institutions required qualifications or course enrolment for all positions. Animal attendants were the group usually excluded from any formal requirement that they possess relevant qualifications or be enrolled in such a course.

11.6 The other 43 units did not have any formal course requirement for animal house staff. However, most of these animal houses regarded such qualifications as desirable or encouraged staff to enrol in appropriate courses.

11.7 According to the responses to the questionnaire, about 15 per cent of technical staff and about 30 per cent of animal attendants had no relevant qualifications and were not enrolled in courses to gain them in the period 1980-84. These figures are indicative rather than definitive because some institutions did not provide relevant information.

11.8 A survey conducted in Sydney during 1979-80 found that about half the attendants employed in animal houses in research and teaching institutions had no qualifications and were not enrolled in any relevant courses.¹

11.9 The Committee understands that this situation is improving and there may be now a higher proportion of trained staff in animal houses.

11.10 The lack of a whole-hearted commitment to the employment of qualified animal house staff is a matter for concern. It is acknowledged, however, that some of the unqualified staff employed in animal houses are experienced and capable of a high standard of animal care. For many long-term employees, only on the job training was available during the early years of their employment. There were no TAFE courses in which to enrol.

11.11 With on the job training, much depends on the ability and knowledge of the supervisor. Do all supervisors have the ability to train staff? Are they kept up-to-date with the latest techniques? Do they have time available to give attendants the breadth of knowledge they need or just to meet the requirements of particular duties? Some supervisors may give their staff full training but others may not. This will inevitably result in some inadequately trained staff or, worse, the supply of animals not meeting the specifications of experimenters. Staff need the theoretical as well as the practical knowledge to do their jobs properly. To ensure that all staff have a broad theoretical base from which to develop their expertise and to give them the opportunity to make animal care a satisfying career, institutions must adopt staffing policies which allow unqualified staff to enrol in animal care or animal technician courses. Anything less is both short-sighted and a disservice to the staff.

Status of Animal House Staff

11.12 In the past, animal houses were accorded low priority for funding and were relegated to a low position within the status hierarchy in institutions. Little attention was paid to working conditions, rates of pay, training of staff or even the standard of husbandry in animal houses. The smaller the institution, the worse was the record.

11.13 Concomitant with management's treatment of the staff of animal houses, many experimenters also accorded little respect to animal house staff or had no understanding of the importance of their work.

11.14 A representative of the Australian Animal Technicians Association (AATA) described the attitudes prevailing at the time he began to work in this area:

I have been working with small animals for 25 years, and when I first started the person working in the animal house was not considered at all. He was just there with a broom or shovel. He just fed the animals and cleaned the animal house. The researcher would come into the animal house and carry out the experiment, possibly not even speaking to the person there.²

11.15 Another witness described the attitude to staff in an animal house attached to a hospital in the following terms:

I am employed as a laboratory attendant. The authorities prefer people to do the course. You are not paid any more and the two wardsmen who look after our animal house do not want to go any further. Of course after years of being there, they are paid on the equivalent scale to me. They say: 'Why should we go to college or whatever because we are not going to get paid any more.'³

11.16 While attitudes revealed in the institution discussed above are not necessarily typical they point to difficulties in staffing and training of animal house staff particularly in smaller institutions.

11.17 Mr I. Harris, Director of the University of Queensland Central Animal House, expressed the following view:

The problem now, I think, is nowhere near as acute as it might have been in the past ... Most large institutions around Australia are now employing trained people and actively encouraging people to be trained. The problem, where it exists, tends to be in smaller places.⁴

11.18 During inspections at two universities, the Committee encountered a disregard for animal house rules by some experimenters. Other anecdotal information from a range of sources drew attention to either the unthinking or even the cavalier attitude being taken by a minority of experimenters towards animal houses and their staff. The AATA submitted:

Animal technicians who remain in the field for any length of time develop a real concern for the welfare of the animals in their charge. Conflict with the animal experimentation practices of some scientists sometimes occurs in experimental animal houses. Given the lowly status of the animal technicians, their views are likely to be ignored in such a situation. In institutions where technicians do not have access to an animal house veterinarian or animal welfare officer, the resolution of such conflicts can be very difficult.

The A.A.T.A. believes that all institutions working with experimental animals should have an animal house veterinarian or animal welfare officer to whom technicians can take their problems in this regard.⁵

11.19 With the trend towards appointing more veterinarians to oversee the operations of animal houses, particularly in the larger institutions, there should be a diminution of this problem. In addition, if the number of animal houses contracts, many of the smaller animal houses will disappear. All the evidence points to the worst problems occurring in those areas. However, even professional staff sometimes have difficulties with some experimenters. It is essential, therefore, that written procedures be adopted to enable difficulties between experimenters and animal house staff to be resolved. Such

difficulties should be brought to the attention of the chairman of the ethics committee and it is his or her responsibility to either rectify the problem or raise it with senior management. Animal house staff must be able to draw attention to improper, inhumane or even illegal practices without any fear of retribution of any kind against them for having raised the matter.

11.20 A number of other difficulties concerning the career options available to animal technicians were raised by the AATA:

The career structure and promotion opportunities for animal technicians vary widely from institution to institution. In many cases, they lag well behind the opportunities and level of financial reward for laboratory technicians with comparable levels of training. In many institutions it is not recognised as a skilled occupation at all. The fact that it is a small area of employment within some institutions worsens the problem.

The result is that there tends to be a fast turnover in animal technician staff, and the more capable people do not tend to remain in the field very long as they are attracted to better opportunities in other areas.

The A.A.T.A. believes this has a detrimental effect on the quality of experimental animal care, which could be improved if the career structure and promotional opportunities available to animal technicians were comparable to that in other fields with similar training requirements, e.g. laboratory technicians.

Also, in some States, the relevant T.A.F.E. course is not recognized by major employers as providing eligibility for promotion to technical officer grades. This creates a major obstacle to promotion opportunities. This would be overcome if a suitable national core training curriculum was adopted in all States.⁶

11.21 The accreditation of research institutions which is an integral part of the New South Wales Animal Research Act is likely to influence institutional policy on these issues within that State as assessment of the quality and qualifications of the staff is part of the process of accreditation.

Training in Animal Care

11.22 Courses in animal care are currently offered at TAFE institutions in the Australian Capital Territory and every State except Tasmania.

11.23 The publication of a national core curriculum by the Curriculum Projects Steering Group of the Australian Conference of TAFE Directors marks a significant step forward. Core curricula have been agreed upon for both the one year Animal Attendants Course and the four year Animal Technicians Course.

11.24 Work is proceeding in several States to bring animal care courses into line with the core curriculum recommendations. The AATA and ASLAS agreed that adoption by all States and Territories of a common core curriculum would enable greater mobility of staff between States and open up greater options with respect to career paths for qualified staff.⁷

11.25 The Committee encourages the close involvement of employer and industry groups in the development and implementation of new animal care courses. Given the relative shortage of expertise in the laboratory animal area such involvement will be absolutely necessary if standards of teaching and the relevance of courses to students is to be maximised. Priority should be given to the development of ongoing external review and assessment of animal care courses where this does not already exist.

11.26 Providing the resources to implement the curricula effectively is likely to be difficult not only because of direct constraints on finance and equipment but also because of the relatively small size of the industry and hence the lack of appropriately experienced and qualified teachers. Constraints have led to unqualified people being called upon to teach courses in this field.⁸

11.27 One particular development that was drawn to the attention of the Committee has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of even current institutional commitments to upgrading staff qualifications. Dr J. Smith appearing on behalf of the Australian National University pointed out:

... while a lot of the TAFE courses are run after normal working hours, there are some that cannot be run after normal working hours for various reasons and people have to be given time off from work to attend tech. With the gradual tightening of the economic situation over the last few years, most animal houses, I think, have been told to increase their efficiency and most have. Part of this is reducing staff because staff is the greatest expense in any animal establishment. A lot of them are reaching the stage where it will be very difficult to give any staff any time off from normal working hours and still maintain their standards of animal care.⁹

11.28 Should this situation occur more widely, the impact on animal welfare both in the long and short term is likely to be substantial and undo much of the progress achieved by the upgrading of facilities that has already occurred. As the Committee argued in Chapter 10, on both welfare and scientific grounds, if animals are to be used in experimentation, facilities and staffing must be of a consistently high standard. This cannot be achieved if research institutions do not have the resources to enable appropriate staff training to be undertaken.

11.29 The Committee RECOMMENDS that all institutions with animal houses require unqualified staff to undertake technical training courses in animal care at colleges of technical and further education.

Professional Staff

11.30 Only the institutions which have a large breeding unit as part of their animal house operations are generally in a position to employ a professional director or manager. Discussing the management of their animal house Professor Cooper explained the difficulties of small to medium sized units in employing full time veterinarians:

It is again a question of our small size. Ideally, we would like to have somebody with a veterinary qualification in that sort of position, but it is quite clear that the job is not big enough for that. I have alluded in this paper to the fact that we are negotiating with another institution to pay it a retainer and have it act as our veterinary consultant. I may say that we have done very well up until now in getting it free from a number of institutions. So since we cannot appoint at that kind of level, we have appointed at Mr Smallshaw's level, which is at a senior technical level ... It does mean that he has to establish liaison with people off campus to obtain the kind of expertise which we do not have.¹⁰

11.31 A similar issue was raised by Dr Kuchel. Asked whether it was necessary to employ qualified veterinarians he replied:

... with the increased complexity of running research facilities and breeding facilities you need someone with day-to-day administrative and physical control to have veterinary qualifications, so that all of the implications of what is happening at that facility, as far as the researcher is concerned and as far as the breeding program

is concerned, are picked up as soon as possible and dealt with appropriately. The field of laboratory animal science now is becoming, rather than just an amalgam of general clinical principles, a discipline in its own right that requires, for it to be done properly, the sort of basic sciences background that the degree in veterinary science gives you.¹¹

11.32 The Committee acknowledges the difficulty of employing veterinarians in institutions with relatively small animal houses. The best arrangement is to have a veterinarian within the institution or one located nearby to be on call in case of problems. The long-term solution is, however, for the contraction in the number of breeding units and a move towards the centralisation of breeding within a region. In this way, most animals will be bred in purpose-built facilities with professional staff.