Most Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies (AWERBs), and establishments in general, devote considerable time to the Three Rs, which are concerned with the practical aspects regarding the use of animals; there is a great deal of factual information available to help implement these. However, AWERB members have consistently said that they find identification and consideration of ethical issues much more difficult. The definition of an ‘ethical issue’ can be unclear and seem more nebulous, and there may be very different interpretations of exactly what constitutes an ethical issue, both within the AWERB and within the establishment generally. It can therefore be difficult to identify and raise ethical concerns, either during project review or for discussion in other forums within the establishment. As a result, AWERBs may focus on the application of the Three Rs (which is of course very important) and not tackle the more difficult ethical questions. Nevertheless, ‘ethics’ should pervade all of the AWERB’s tasks, and members have said that they would welcome information and advice to help them to more fully realise this aspect of the committee’s work, and to promote more comprehensive ethical review within their own AWERBs and establishments.

This meeting aimed to assist with this issue through a series of presentations exploring the meaning and interpretation of ‘ethics’ from different perspectives within science, together with discussion sessions on topics that the organising societies felt presented their members with difficult ethical questions. It was attended by 96 participants representing a range of AWERB members including animal technologists, project licence holders, Named Persons, lay and independent members.

Introduction, setting out the aims of the day. Penny Hawkins, RSPCA [Click here] for slides

Morning session - Definitions and contexts – chaired by Ken Applebee (IAT)

What do we mean by ethics? Jane Smith, Boyd Group [Click here]

Does the current culture of scientific research encourage considered ethical review and reflection? James Parry, UK Research Integrity Office [Click here]

Ethics in a parallel field. Mark Sheehan, Oxford Biomedical Research Centre [Click here]

Afternoon session - Ethics in practice - chaired by Katherine Knight (ASRU)

Five parallel breakout discussions on topics involving the application of practical ethics, chaired by the organisers.

- Ethics of projects that have already been funded and/or are being done abroad or elsewhere in the UK – Establishment Licence Holders’ Forum [Click here]
- Ethics of research into diseases or conditions affecting only a small percentage of the population – LASA [Click here]
- Ethics of using ‘special species’. What makes these ‘special’ and what does it mean in principle and practice? – LAVA [Click here]
- Emotional well-being of staff involved in the killing of animals, e.g. in the context of genetically altered animal use – IAT [Click here]
- Ethics of using new or recently developed technologies, e.g. optogenetics – RSPCA [Click here]

Putting ethics into project licence review. Virginia Warren, University of Cambridge [Click here] for slides and [here] for notes

Scientist’s perspective on ethics. James Stewart, University of Liverpool [Click here]
The meeting and its workshops were organised by:

Penny Hawkins & Maggy Jennings - RSPCA
Anne-Marie Farmer - LASA
Ken Applebee - IAT
Ute Weyer & Ngaire Dennison - LAVA
Anne-Marie Farmer - University of Cambridge
Jane Smith - The Boyd Group
Charles Gentry - Establishment Licence Holders’ Forum

Please contact research.animals@rspca.org.uk if you would like any further information about this meeting, or you have suggestions for future topics.