

Category D Members on Animal Ethics Committees (AECs)

As an Category D member of an AEC have you ever felt that one of the following could describe how you feel?

A fish out of water?



Out in the cold?



or even.....

A shrinking violet?



Then the following brochure contains some valuable information on why you may have these thoughts, why it is natural and even necessary for you to have these thoughts - and some strategies for dealing with them.

This information is provided by the:
Animal Welfare Committee of the
National Health and Medical Research Council.

1. Why are Category D members of AECs important?

By definition Category D members bring an **independent** view to the AEC. They have special skills, knowledge and understanding to influence the social mores of the institution on whose AEC they serve.

2. Why is it natural that you may sometimes feel “on the outer” at AEC meetings?

According to the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (The Code)*, the Category D person *should not fit* any of the other categories. By definition, your presence on an AEC depends on you having no connection with the institution and no research or teaching experience in areas involving animals!

Unless the committee on which you serve has more than one Category D member, you are bound to feel singular. In fact, your effectiveness depends upon it. In reality, as an important part of the decision-making process, you are by no means alone, and without your presence and input on the AEC, no research can proceed.

3. What is the responsibility of the Category D members on AECs?

In strictest terms, the basic responsibilities of the Category D members are the same as those of Categories A, B and C. That is:

- To estimate the value of protocols
- To ensure compliance with the standards of *The Code*.

Less formally, your particular responsibility as a Category D member is to bring to the AEC your independent viewpoint on animal welfare issues as a reflection of the current values of the community outside the research world.

4. Am I suited to be a Category D member on an AEC?

Although it involves a lot of preparatory reading, and extra commitment of time to attend meetings, membership on an AEC can be a rewarding activity. But it is not the sort of voluntary undertaking that suits everyone.

- Most importantly, you need to be prepared to question, and possibly continue questioning, AEC chairs, scientists and anybody else who is not making complete sense to you. Rather than viewing your request for information as a personal shortcoming, see any fault as lying with the scientist who is unable to communicate in plain English. Draw confidence from the fact that it is a requirement of *The Code* that any protocol under discussion is understandable to you.
- Even though you may feel ‘outnumbered’ by members from other categories, you need to have confidence to speak your mind. Remember, no other membership category brings to the AEC your particular qualities. Do not squander your opportunity to shape and influence the outcome of AEC deliberations.
- There may be disagreements or, in rare cases, conflicts at AEC meetings. They may arise amongst committee members, or with the researchers appearing before the committee, and there should be a procedure for resolving disputes. However, if the notion of maintaining a potentially unpopular position causes you concern, you may be happier declining an offer of AEC membership.
- You need to be a good listener and maintain an open mind.
- You need to assess the aspects of a new application that have importance to you, and not worry that you may not fully understand all of the technical details. These are well covered by members from other categories who will be happy to explain them to you in lay language.

That stated, you are free to seek outside expert advice. The only restriction on your doing so is the need to maintain confidentiality.

- It is helpful for you to have a sense of loyalty to the institution on whose AEC you sit and to try and protect it from adverse outcomes related to the operation of the AEC. Remember, the ultimate responsibility for animals used in research and teaching lies with the institution.
- And finally, you need to be a person with people skills. Much of the success of a well-functioning committee depends on the ability of its members to interact, talk freely and respect each other's point of view.

5. What are the most important aspects of an application from the Category D perspective?

Of course these will vary between individuals and from one AEC to the next. The following list, presented in no particular order, offers a few suggestions, none of which require specialist knowledge:

- Does the lay statement make sense to you? This is an important question. A “yes” underpins the correct functioning of the AEC. If you cannot understand the lay statement, by all means ask the researcher to present another. Be prepared for what may be a less than favourable response.
- Have the three Rs – *Replacement - Reduction - Refinement*, as described in *The Code* been considered?
- Where more than one surgery step is proposed, has consideration been given to how much recovery time is needed between operations?
- *The Code* dictates that death as an end point should be avoided. However, occasionally, death as an end-point is an unavoidable outcome of research. You need to prepare your thoughts regarding how you would deal with such a protocol.
- Are individual animals being held for an unreasonably long time?

- Are animals being used in more than one experiment to “save” on extra surgery?
- Is the post-operational care of the animals the best possible?
- Has the matter of pain and suffering to the animal been considered and addressed by the researcher?
- Has the researcher included the provision of appropriate pain-killers for minimising pain in animals recovering from surgery?
- Are you convinced that the animals will be cared for throughout the experiment, including after hours, when researchers should be both available and contactable?
- Is back-up veterinary care readily available?

You may like to add your own points, to make this a personal checklist.

6. Other members of the AEC have organisations and institutions to which they can turn for support. Category Ds have no such umbrella.

It's true. But despite this, category D members have access to a number of resources on which they can draw for information or advice. These include the following people:

- Animal Welfare groups
- The Chair of your AEC
- Other members of your AEC
- The researchers with protocols before the AEC
- Management of the animal facility
- The member of the institution to whom the AEC is responsible. Depending on the institution, this may be the CEO, the Director or the Vice-Chancellor
- NHMRC AWC Secretariat

AND

The following publications:

- *The Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* (the Code)

- Other Guides, policies and Codes of Practice published by NHMRC, as listed in *The Code*.
- Newsletters and Guidelines from the Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching - ANZCCART (see contacts)
- Standard Operational Procedures for the institution.
- The Internet, particularly the NHMRC Animal Welfare Committee site and the ANZCCART site (see Contacts)

7. Some researchers don't seem to take seriously the role of the AEC.

The attitudes of scientists to animal welfare have progressed considerably through the 90's, particularly amongst young researchers who have grown up with AECs as part of their research culture. A perceived lack of gravity from a researcher may reflect more a lack of awareness of the AEC role.

Entrenched attitudes are not easy to turn around, and some investigators are very strongly attached to their views! Don't be reluctant to take a firm stand against conservatism. Try not to have unrealistic expectations of the extent and speed of change. In other words, don't give up. Remember, you are more likely to affect change from within the system.

8. There appears to be no mechanism in place on my AEC for dealing with grievances related to the operation of the committee.

There should be. It is a requirement of *The Code* that AECs have Terms of Reference. These should include details of how decisions are reached and how disputes are settled. They should be available to all members of the AEC, and also for scrutiny by intending new members.

If you have never seen the Terms of Reference, or the operating procedures, for your AEC, there is a chance that they may not exist. *The Code* provides useful information regarding what the terms of reference should encompass.

Does your AEC function as it should, according to *The Code*?

As a Category D member of an AEC, you have a responsibility, along with members from all other categories, to ensure that the committee functions properly. If you have any doubts regarding procedures on your committee, the following list may help you to focus on the problem and raise it with other members of the AEC.

- Does the AEC meet regularly to consider applications? Is the Chairman present? Is there a quorum? Remember there must be a Category D member present for a quorum.
- How does the committee handle protocols tabled on the day of the meeting?
- Do the members of the committee have access to the researchers?
- How is discussion handled by the Chair?
- Are the Categories C and D members included in discussions?
- How are emergency meetings handled? Are there requests for responses over the telephone?
- Does the Committee have an executive? Is it legal? It must include a Category C or D member. Was it agreed upon by all Committee members?
- How often does the Committee visit the animal house?
- Does the Committee follow up on projects that it has approved?
- Does the Committee produce an annual report summarising what was approved, what happened, etc? Is this document provided to the head of the institution?
- Are there any procedures in place for handling dissent?

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