
Ethical decisions, challenges, risks, and opportunities

In person presentation ANZCVS 2025

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This presentation will cover the challenges and risks associated with ethical decisions and suggest strategies and tools to support ethical decision makers to make consistent, transparent and confident decisions.

Recently there have been high-profile examples where the ethical decisions made by Animal Ethics Committees (AECs) have come under scrutiny. Applying a systematic approach can not only support decision making but enhance public and other stakeholders' confidence.

As decision makers under law, AECs must meet the requirements of the *Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes, 2013, updated 2021*. The purpose of the Code is to promote the ethical, humane and responsible care and use of animals for scientific purposes. The fundamental premise is that animal use for scientific purposes is acceptable, but on certain conditions described in the code.

The ethical framework to guide decisions under the code is utilitarianism, the concept of greater good for all applies. However, animals don't voluntarily sign up to be used in scientific research, it is inherently anthropocentric, hence the ethical dilemma. AEC members take on the challenge to make these ethical decisions, and they are difficult to make, often with substantial justification of the proposed benefit.

Ethical decisions are influenced by our personal judgment, where we evaluate actions as good or bad, right or wrong. This essentially involves a cost-benefit analysis from the perspective of the animals involved. It's important to recognize that each of us brings our own perspectives and values to these discussions. Employing a decision-making framework can help facilitate robust and challenging conversations and provide clarity in the decision-making process, ultimately enhancing integrity and trust.

However, should we be thinking more broadly about risk, ethics and social licence? Understanding the (somewhat intangible) conditions imposed by the community regarding the social licence for animal use is essential.

We are familiar with the rules and have read the Australian Code. Many organisations using animals will have regulatory compliance in their risk management framework. Respect for animals forms the foundation of the

governing principles outlined in the Australian Code, this is the basis for the public's acceptance of animal use in research.

Should organisations embed the social licence conditions into their risk framework and consider their risk appetite?

What is an acceptable limit of harm beyond which a procedure, or a type of animal research should not take place?

How can we determine this limit, and how can we make a judgment against the anticipated benefit?

Is prohibition of certain activities the solution?

How are ethical decision makers supported, and what are the risks?

This presentation will encourage attendees to reflect on their ethical viewpoint and their role in ensuring that if animals must be used for the benefit of humans, such use is ethical.
