

OPINION ARTICLE

The Concordat on openness on Animal Research and Animal Technologists

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As the IAT celebrates its 70th birthday, Wendy Jarrett from Understanding Animal Research reflects on the key role that animal care staff have played in supporting the Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK and considers how they might help the public to understand animal research in the future.

It would be fair to say that the results of Ipsos MORI's 2012 opinion research into the public's views on animal research were a shock to our sector.¹ They showed a 10 percentage point drop in public acceptance of the use of animals in research, from around three quarters of the GB population saying in 2010 that they could accept animal research down to around two thirds saying the same thing in 2012. Was this a blip or the start of a worryingly downward trend? Why, when animal rights extremism – and the publicity that surrounded it – had disappeared, was the UK public becoming less accepting, rather than more so? The UK bioscience community agreed that we could not afford to wait to find out the answers: something needed to be done as soon as possible to help the public to understand why and how animals are used in scientific research in this country. We identified the need for more and better communication with the public and around 40 organisations announced in October 2012 that they would work together to develop a Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK.²

Over the next 18 months Understanding Animal Research (UAR) coordinated the work to draft the Concordat, forming a Steering Group and a Working Group.

We sought a wide range of opinions on what openness around animal research should look like, including a meeting with the UK's leading science journalists and a public dialogue project to find out what the public really thought about this issue. The focus groups that made up the public dialogue project revealed quite a

high level of misunderstanding among the public about animal research: several people thought that we were talking about cosmetic testing, many thought that the main animals used in research were dogs, cats and monkeys, and most were unaware that anaesthetics and analgesics are required in the vast majority of cases where they can help to alleviate pain. But we also found that the participants had quite sophisticated concerns about the lack of openness around animal research: they worried that unnecessary duplication might be going on if no one was sharing information about their current projects, and they wanted reassurance that the research being carried out was valid and had a good chance of leading to medical progress.

When we had a draft Concordat that we were happy with, we opened it for public consultation for six weeks towards the end of 2013. After some minor tweaks the Concordat was published in May 2014.

Animal care staff had, of course, already been positive ambassadors for animal research well before the Concordat came about. Technologists had been involved in several leading examples of openness such as the Coalition for Medical Progress project whereby journalism students had been given tours of the facilities at both King's College London and Huntingdon Life Sciences, with Animal Technologists accompanying them to explain how and why the animals were used and cared for.

Once the Concordat was published, signatory organisations were committed to supporting staff who

wanted to be open about their work and we began to see a wider range of communications activities. Statements on websites confirmed that organisations were carrying out animal research and we started to see more images and videos of research animals on websites and social media.

In 2015 UAR organised the first competitive Openness Awards, designed to celebrate the great work being done to help improve public understanding, inviting entries from Concordat signatory organisations. From the start of these Awards, animal care staff were involved in many of the winning and commended activities, from supporting media visits to King's College London's marmoset facilities to Agenda's *Welfare First* programme, and posters of Named People being displayed at the MRC's Laboratory of Molecular Biology.

In subsequent years the IAT's Careers Pathway won an Openness Award, as did Leicester University's media engagement with *The Sun* and GSK's remote video tour of its animal facilities. None of these award-winning projects would have been possible without the involvement of Animal Technologists.

Animal care staff have also been involved with UAR's schools talks programme, now re-named *The Animal Research Conversation*. As with tours of facilities, young people have found it very reassuring to hear that laboratory animals are looked after by people who love animals and to learn about the lengths that Animal Technologists go to in order to care for them.

In 2017 UAR created Labanimaltour.org, an online 360° video tour of four UK animal research facilities. As well as the walk-through tours, visitors can click on videos and information boxes to find more detail. Many of these videos feature animal care staff explaining how the animals are fed, housed, trained, treated and cared for.

The 2014, 2016 and 2018 Ipsos MORI opinion research findings show that public acceptance of animal research is holding steady and that the feared downward trend has not materialised, at least not yet. The numbers of people who think that animal research establishments are secretive are dropping and the numbers that consider themselves well-informed about research using animals are rising. Since the Concordat was published we have had almost six years of constantly improving public engagement and communications activities in the UK and Spain, Portugal and Belgium have published their own versions of the Concordat with several further countries, including the USA, considering how they can enhance openness.

So, where do we go from here? What should our sector's next steps be to continue to improve public understanding?

None of us has a crystal ball, but I would like to highlight three areas where I think we need to prepare for the future. In each of these, Animal Technologists will have an important role to play in helping the public to understand the reality of animal research in the UK in the 21st Century.

We have seen a huge change over the last ten years in how people access information about the world. Social media is gradually taking over from traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. While this is a good thing in many ways, it undoubtedly leads to more opportunities for misinformation to reach a large number of people, particularly younger people. We need to continue to adapt and evolve our communications strategies to keep up. We will need people who work in animal research, and especially Animal Technologists, to share accurate content on social media, comment on and correct misleading posts, and consider creating their own posts to help people understand the reality of animal research.

The second area that we will need to embrace is an increase in public concern about animal welfare. This is being seen across the board, from the way animals in the food chain are treated to concerns about animals used in sport and recreation. While we would all applaud the public's concerns, we will want to ensure that they are based on fact and not fiction. Once again, animal care staff will be some of the best ambassadors in helping the public to understand how and why animals are used in scientific research in this country.

And thirdly, we will need to adapt to the changes we will see in the way that animal protection groups work. We are slowly getting used to the idea that illegal animal rights extremism is a thing of the past, but we need to accept that legitimate forms of protest are here to stay. We are already seeing a rise in groups demonstrating outside animal facilities as well as campaigns targeting particular areas of research. Our sector will need to be resilient and robust in its explanations of why our work is important.

UAR does its best to counter these campaigns and support those institutions that are affected. We will continue to de-bunk misinformation on social media, to give media interviews on behalf of the sector and to remind government and the Civil Service why research using animals remains a small but vital part of medical and veterinary progress. We will also continue to provide opportunities for young people to find out about the reality of animal research and encourage them to make up their own minds about the ethics of

this research. But UAR's budget is tiny compared to the incomes of organisations opposed to animal research and we need every organisation that uses or funds the use of animals in research to play their part in helping the public to understand what they do and why and how they do it. There are many opportunities for animal care staff to engage with the public. If anyone would like support and advice from UAR on how to start communicating, please get in touch with us. We are always happy to help our member organisations and can provide training in various different aspects of public engagement, starting with how to go about telling your friends and family what you do for a living.

We have thankfully moved on from the 'bad old days' of animal rights extremism, to the extent that many people working today as Animal Technologists have never experienced any form of intimidation connected to their work. We need to capitalise on this more supportive environment that we have all worked so hard to create and maintain it by helping the public to understand the benefits that animal research brings to science and society and the role of animal technicians in caring for laboratory animals.

References

- ¹ **Ipsos MORI** (2012). Views on the use of animals in scientific research
<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/views-use-animals-scientific-research>
- ² **Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK.**
<http://concordatopenness.org.uk/about-the-concordat-on-openness>