

# The Ethics of Research on Companion Animals for the Benefit of Their Own Species

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**Summary** — A fundamental component of the ethics of animal use in science is justification on the basis of a cost–benefit analysis where the cost is to the animals and the benefit is to the same species, another species, the environment or human society. This analysis is the baseline from which research projects can be refined to increase the benefit and reduce the animal cost. Research on companion animal species to the benefit of that species provides some interesting aspects of cost–benefit analysis. These include: the interface between clinical research in animals and the practise of veterinary science; the greater acceptance of animal research that benefits that animal species; and the allied benefits of companion animal research to society, companion animal owners, animal drug and food industries, and so forth. In many cases, these allied benefits are integral to the availability of resources to conduct the work. However, benefit to the companion animal species involved remains an important and welcome aspect of the use of these species in science.

**Key words:** *companion animals, ethics.*

## Introduction

A cost–benefit analysis is the ethical framework that is typically applied to the review of proposed research involving animals. This paper will deal with situations where the cost is to companion animals and the expected benefits are to their own species, in particular, dogs and cats.

Regulation of animal use typically involves a cost–benefit analysis initially being made by the scientist and then being reviewed, and perhaps approved, by a committee and/or a government official. This is an important validation of the scientist's plans. If queried on the justification of their work, they can answer that a committee and/or government official agreed that their work was justifiable. Also, it is from the cost–benefit analysis that a project can be refined to increase the benefit and decrease the cost to the animals.

## Discussion

An interesting area of research on cats and dogs for the benefit of their own species is clinical research conducted on client-owned animals at veterinary clinics and hospitals. Cats and dogs receive veterinary care often of a monetary cost far greater than their replacement value. This is because they are often highly valued members of the household. This also

means that owners may be willing for their sick dogs and cats to be part of a trial of a new drug or procedure in the hope that it will improve their condition.

To clearly contrast veterinary practice from clinical research, you could say that:

- in veterinary practice, the justification for performing all the procedures is that they are for the benefit of those animals, whereas
- in veterinary clinical research, the animals may still benefit from the procedures, but some or all of the procedures are purely for the purpose of generating new knowledge regarding a clinical issue. For example, there are extra blood samples, anaesthetics or other interventions performed on the animals.

In between these, I would argue there is a continuum, rather than a clear point of discrimination.

The ethics of using client-owned animals are unique. Clearly, the owner has to agree with the proposed study, but does their agreement outweigh the importance of the cost–benefit analysis for the study? Owner consent is not analogous to informed consent of a human volunteer in a clinical trial. An owner's consent might be given for very severe interventions as part of a study if they thought it might mean that their beloved pet might not die.

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A safeguard for researchers in this situation is to have independent review of the cost–benefit analysis of their study. The outcome of this review should then be available to the owners of the companion animals. There is often a regulatory requirement for independent review, the specifics of which will vary according to the local laws relating to veterinary practice and to animal use in science. Alongside the application of regulation in this area, there is a growing recognition in Australia, for example, that Animal Ethics Committee approval for animal use is a good risk management practice for the researcher and the research institution.

Independent review of research proposals also allows any conflict of interest to be explicitly stated. An interesting discussion regarding conflict of interest for researchers was held in American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) journals in 1996 and 1997 (1–3). Several authors proposed that funding sources for research and any financial interest that the researcher had in the company funding the research should be explicitly stated in reports of the research. After this discussion, the AVMA altered its instructions to authors to explicitly include a requirement for authors to identify potential conflicts of interest. It is not only important that journals are advised, but also those people reviewing the cost–benefit analysis of the study. If client-owned animals are to be used, the owners should also be made aware of any potential conflicts of interest for the researchers before they are asked to agree to the involvement of their animal in the study. In this way, a reviewer and an owner of an animal can consider whether the outcomes proposed for the research have been fairly stated.

There are many instances where the use of dogs and cats in biomedical research has led to knowledge that has benefited their own species; for example, our knowledge of canine cardiovascular physiology has been greatly augmented by the use of dogs as a cardiovascular model for people. Other major areas of advance have been the work of drug, vaccine and pet food companies who have provided large amounts of funding in those areas where they determine a reasonable market exists for their products. However, as has been noted by Dame Bridget Ogilvie in 1998 (4), there is little support from public funds for basic research in these species. Some funding exists for small projects from a variety of sources, but some of these sources will not fund research using purpose bred laboratory cats or dogs, but only clinical research using client-owned animals. Also, the availability of limited funds may of itself mean that it is not possible to buy and house animals for a study, but rather client-owned animals may have to be used.

If client-owned animals are used in veterinary clinical research, there are several obvious limitations:

- the group is not random but rather owner-selected, that is, the owner decides whether the animal is taken to the vet, which vet they go to and whether the animal goes into the study;
- there may be limited numbers of suitable animals available;
- there is often limited access to the animals for the researcher; and
- it is typically a heterogenous group of animals, e.g. breed, age, health status, sex.

Therefore, it is difficult to conduct experiments that are designed to control non-experimental variables, and it can be difficult to refine the experiments to improve the outcome and minimise the impact. This leads to a potentially reduced potential benefit of the research that must be taken into account when making a cost–benefit analysis. If less benefit is likely to accrue from the research, you could not justify any major severity on the animal, even if the owner gave consent.

Perusal of the veterinary journals and textbooks shows that there are many areas of basic physiology of cats and dogs that are relatively unstudied. But how would the general public feel about the use of large number of cats and dogs to investigate basic physiology in these species? Cats, dogs, non-human primates and horses often have especial status in western countries. Examples of this include the Great Ape Project and the provision in the New Zealand animal welfare legislation for the restriction of the use of great apes in research only when there is benefit to the animals involved and/or their species. The especial status of great apes due to their similarity to humans has led to debate as to whether they should have the same rights as humans. Some might say that dogs and cats and all other animals have rights as well. If this is so, where does the right of the individual animal to live its life free of suffering fit with the need for companion animals to be used in research to benefit their own species? Should the status of dogs and cats as human companions sway our judgement? Is it preferable to the general public for example, that Distemper virus studies are largely done in ferrets rather than dogs?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has focused largely on clinical research using client-owned animals as an example of the use of companion animals for the benefit of their own species. There are other examples of companion animal use in research where there are important ethical issues, for example, the use of cats and dogs to train vet students so

that they can provide veterinary care to other cats and dogs in the future. It is important that all the ethical issues are considered as part of a cost-benefit analysis by the researcher and by some form of independent review before the research is conducted.

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