

# Talking things out: How institutional transparency could improve animal research

August 29 2022, by Michael W. Brunt

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Research using animals must be more transparent regarding how animals are used and treated. Credit: Shutterstock

Around [five million animals are used annually](#) for scientific or educational purposes in Canada. The use of animals in general, especially for research, can be a divisive issue.

Recently, there have been high-profile instances of [public outcry](#) and groups [questioning the benefits](#) and [oversight of animal research](#). This

could lead to total or partial abolition of animal research and its life-saving applications. While [non-animal alternatives](#) continue to replace [live animals](#), animal research will still be necessary to achieve scientific and medical advances.

## **The animals' experience**

Negative public perception of animal research can be partly explained by animal-rights groups who forward the message—[sometimes quite aggressively](#)—that all animal use should be stopped.

While these groups often have valid concerns regarding the lack of information about lived experiences of these [animals](#), it does not change how animal research has played an essential role in improving the health of humans and animals alike.

Animal rights activists are vocal about the experiences of research animals, while institutions where animal research is conducted are often secretive about how animals are cared for and what research they participate in. This creates a one-sided narrative that resonates with the public, as most people do not condone animal suffering.

Unfamiliarity with animal research, combined with this narrative, can cause moral conflict. My research examines the role of institutional transparency in the public's understanding of, and assumed permission, for the use of animals in [scientific research](#).

## **Freedom to engage**

For activities to be conducted in society, especially contentious ones like animal research, a type of permission by the general public is needed. This is referred to as "[social licence](#)." A social licence provides freedom for a profession to perform its tasks with society's acknowledgement that

it does not understand the profession well enough to regulate it directly, but at the same time, places trust in the sector to self-regulate in ways that follow societal values.

In most developed countries, research at universities is publicly funded and the knowledge it provides is for public benefit. As such, institutions should engage with the public continually to ensure current research practices reflect the evolving values of the community they represent. Without it, certain activities become taboo and can be outright banned.

Scientists cannot just conduct any research they want using animals. In Canada, a protocol describing the intended use of animals, as well as the potential benefits of the experiments, needs to be approved by an [animal care committee](#) at each institution. This is mandated by the [Canadian Council on Animal Care](#), and must be approved for institutions to [receive public funding to conduct animal research](#).

An animal care committee must involve, at minimum, a veterinarian, a scientist conducting research with animals, and at least one member of the public not affiliated with the institution. The committees often include additional perspectives as well. While this process is not without its flaws, it tries to address the concerns about the experiments that are raised by the committee members.

Unfortunately, the public is not usually aware of this process, so the discussions and decisions made by these committees, even though they involve a member of the public, are not enough to maintain social licence.

## **Defining transparency**

To maintain social licence, meaningful dialogue involving people of diverse backgrounds and opinions is required. For this to happen, any

interested member of the public must have access to basic information about animal research.

This is currently challenging, as broad public input is not generally sought during the process of deciding how animals will be used for research. Institutions can encourage meaningful public dialogue by being transparent about their experiments and policies involving animals.

However, transparency must first be defined and agreed to by all stakeholders at an institution. My studies with [research animal facility managers](#) and [attending veterinarians](#) showed interpretations of institutional transparency varied within and between Canadian universities.

Some would have liked their institution to view transparency as communicating information for the sake of openness, while others described transparency as a means to educate or manipulate public opinion in support of animal research. Some viewed transparency negatively because they fear it could foster opposition to animal research. Sustained communication will be necessary to build a consensus on how to pursue transparency in a sincere and respectful manner.

In addition to internal discussions within an institution, external factors could greatly help achieve transparency. These could include specific requirements from national [granting agencies](#) or some form of transparency agreement by individual institutions, as is [currently present in the United Kingdom](#) and throughout [Europe](#).

This is important, as the lack of an institutional motivation to change [transparency](#) practices in Canada was an obstacle raised by attending veterinarians in their interviews.

## Public involvement

Some members of the scientific community may doubt if the [general public](#) possesses the knowledge to provide useful input concerning the use of animals for scientific experimentation.

My research requesting [public input on proposed animal experiments](#) found participants provided practical and nuanced input that could aid in institutional decision making.

This type of public input would offer institutions a better understanding of societal concerns, such as the severity of animal suffering, and reduce the risk that research practices are out of step with community values.

There is no single solution to this complex and value-laden issue.

Some scholars have recommended a "[new openness](#)" approach that provides diverse opportunities for the public to participate when, and how, they deem appropriate.

Additionally, I suggest releasing information about [animal research](#) should be framed as the start of a journey that will involve discussion, collaboration and negotiation. This can lead to improved decisions for animals used in research by further aligning the [research](#) community and broader society.

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