Animal Research: Make the grade

Last updated August 24, 2007 7:20 p.m. PT

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER EDITORIAL BOARD

The University of Washington still has a considerable distance to go in clearing up questions about its animal research. The university's top leadership, including the president and regents, must show sustained resolve to meet the highest standards.

It shouldn't have taken this much attention from a national accreditation review group, animal rights activists like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and federal officials to bring more institutional interest in supporting high-quality programs, and especially proper facilities. The university is consistently a leader among higher education institutions in research funding, receiving $1 billion in grants during the last fiscal year.

Some degree of animal experimentation figures into grants involving $250 million or more. It was institutionally neglectful or worse to let some facilities become so derelict as to prompt replacement demands from the national accrediting organization. Without accreditation, the UW couldn't receive any grants for animal research.

The university has responded seriously to the various questions. It is reviewing records for possible repayments of some National Institutes of Health grant money where surgeries were performed on a number of monkeys without approval. More staffers are being hired to help with oversight of scattered research activities. Money is flowing to upgrade facilities, some 60 years old.

On the most significant front, the university continues to work with the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care to satisfy its concerns about facilities, oversight and "a lack of institutional support." In an Aug. 1 letter, the association applauded the UW's "robust response." But Nona Phillips, the UW Animal Welfare Office director, said a probationary period for the university will likely continue into next year.

President Mark Emmert and regents should recruit an ethicist, from the faculty or the community, to join the key UW oversight committee. We hope the UW and other schools will vigorously use scientific advances to reduce or end the need for animal tests. And don't sanctuaries offer an increasing option for avoiding many euthanizations?

The UW's record of research leadership demands more than just getting on top of its problems. It can help us all look for larger improvements that will make it and society proud.

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