

Seminar I: General research ethics

Research on animals and animal Ethics

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Problem

More than 33 million people today have HIV and risk contracting AIDS if they do not receive effective inhibitor medications. A great deal of research is being conducted to find a cure for HIV/AIDS using chimpanzees which, besides man, is the only animal that can get HIV/AIDS.

You are a member of an ethics committee on animal experiments that is to ethically evaluate a research project aiming to test the effectiveness of a potential vaccine. The researchers inform the committee that the vaccine's effect needs to be tested on advanced AIDS, which means that the chimpanzees will be in very poor health when the actual experimenting begins.

What ethically significant aspects to you feel should be considered to ethically evaluate whether this experiment should be approved? Think from both a researcher's and a layman's evaluation perspective.

Will there be any ethical problems or conflicts in the context, in the organisation or in the group where your decision will be applied or your solution will be used (e.g. your research findings)?

Ethical issue:

a) Let the disease progress in the laboratory animals, to such an extent that they are in very poor health when the vaccine is put to test. This implies the chimpanzees will be in distress.

b) The number of humans affected is 33 million, the knowledge gained from the experiments could be enormous, and if tests are successful, the gain to society would be unparalleled.

Will your decision or solution cause any ethical problems or conflicts?

- Look at the results of tests that led to the point where permission for animal testing was being sought.
- Demands are critical
- Computer simulations on models
- Cell culture results or results from tissue reaction to the vaccine
- Seek the help of an expert in the domain of such research to try and predict the effectiveness of the vaccine from these results
- The facility design should be examined to check that it meets the physical and social needs of the chimpanzees
- They have access to pain relief medication and veterinarians in case of unforeseen medical complications

Conflict solution: Use chimpanzees who are already affected by AIDS => more expensive and restrictive
Hence I would like to give the group some time-frame within which they have to come back and share their intent of finding such cases and if unsuccessful to explain the reason for such setback.

After all these curiosities are satisfied I would vote to approve the experiment. Since morally I would feel that I have fulfilled my responsibility to be as rational and knowledgeable about the experiment as possible and then passed the judgement, I do not foresee any ethical problems or conflicts with the decision.

Are there any alternatives to your solution?

Since

- 1) Only humans and chimpanzees can contract the disease
- 2) Swedish law does not allow use of new treatment on humans before animal testing
- 3) millions of people are affected by the disease of AIDS I don't see any alternatives to my solution of testing the vaccine.

Of course cancelling the test would be a trivial one.

What if instead of this disease affecting millions of people, it just affects a much smaller number? Would we still allow it?

What groups, individuals, organisations, etc, will in any way be affected by or have a stake in the development, use, application or mere existence of your decision and solution? (Including society at large and the environment.)

People with AIDS might get benefit from the experiment, since there is the potential of success. Many of the cured people will contribute positively to the society, so the overall society also gains.

Since all documents of such decision are a matter of public record, any research group doing similar vaccine research would benefit from the knowledge of the result on the application. This will help them during their own application process.

What values, interests, duties, standpoints and attitudes are involved in the use of your solution and of the possible alternatives?

1. Intrinsic scientific value: cure a very complicated disease, enhance our understanding of the complexity of human/primate body.
2. Utilitarian value: Millions would be happier if the experiment succeeded.
3. Instrumental value: Being able to find a cure for a disease that afflicts millions
4. Intrinsic value: Chimpanzees are the only other animals who can get AIDS. They have the right of access to means of fulfilling their physical and social needs.
5. Experimental results might ultimately help fellow human beings and society as a whole it caters to the idea of providing special value and integrity that humans are generally allotted compared to other animals.

What values, interests, duties, standpoints and attitudes are involved in the use of your solution and of the possible alternatives?

The alternative to my decision, which is to disapprove the experiment, would enforce our moral value of not hurting the innocent, including animals. It is the universal compassion, expressed for example in Buddhism. The long term benefit is that human beings might evolve to be universal compassionate beings, and consequently, happier, even though we cannot cure all of our diseases.

What effects will your solution (and the alternatives) have on each of these values? What are the strengths/possibilities and the weaknesses/risks of each solution to each value? Will these solutions fit certain values and conflict with others? What values and how?

Instrumental value: The experiment on the chimpanzees is in the service of human beings and society and thus increases their instrumental value. We may argue though that animals are not instruments for research, and this would be supported by the viewpoint of not approving the experiment.

What effects will your solution (and the alternatives) have on each of these values? What are the strengths/possibilities and the weaknesses/risks of each solution to each value? Will these solutions fit certain values and conflict with others? What values and how?

Intrinsic value: The chimpanzees being animals have intrinsic value but it is being undermined as they are being used in experiments where they will be inflicted with a complicated disease which will be allowed to progress to an advanced state in them. However, if we use chimpanzees that were already ill (not artificially inflicted for the experimentation), we are not undervaluing their intrinsic value. Potential success benefits the chimpanzees too.

What effects will your solution (and the alternatives) have on each of these values? What are the strengths/possibilities and the weaknesses/risks of each solution to each value? Will these solutions fit certain values and conflict with others? What values and how?

Special value and integrity of humans: The use of animals in the service of human beings serves the traditional idea that humans are special, but the fact that proper care is taken to ensure the basic rights of all living creatures is taken care of in terms of provision of proper facilities points to the fact that we are being responsible with our special position in the animal kingdom.

What will you do to make sure that the use of the solution will be optimal with regards to ethical aspects? For instance, adapt the design of the product, use of research methods, cooperation with industry, information to stakeholders, etc? How exactly are you going to succeed with this?

Since care has been taken to exhaust all possible paths to test the vaccine on animals, I think that the decision to allow or cease the experiment will be ethically optimal. The experiment will be allowed only after results on computer simulations on models, results from cell culture or from tissue reaction to the vaccine and opinion of an expert in the domain of such research are affirmative. However, a successful test on chimpanzees doesn't necessarily imply success on human beings due to genetic differences. This often happens with drugs that are tested on mice and later fail on humans, which is bad since it involves unnecessary suffering to the animals and it is, in general, a waste of money and effort. If in our case there are strong arguments suggesting so, we may be drawn to disapprove the experiment.