



Culture of Care: A Comprehensive Approach to Supporting People and Animals

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How do we develop a sustainable workplace during a time of increasing pressure to eliminate animal research? As we work towards the goal of replacing animals, we must stay vigilant in our responsibility to ensure their health and well-being. Equally important is continuing our efforts to support the people that care for and use research animals. A culture of care is integral to our industry – it’s a commitment to foster an environment that is respectful and caring towards people as well as animals. A comprehensive program addresses methods to improve animal welfare, scientific quality, staff morale, and transparency with stakeholders, including the public. It does this by supporting employees’ emotional well-being, raising awareness of both human and animal contributions to science, defining mechanisms for discussing concerns, and promoting inclusion.

Animal welfare will always be a priority in animal research. Providing support to the humans that care for them is one way to ensure welfare is at its best. Employee recognition programs where individuals and teams are acknowledged meaningfully for their contributions can help provide that support. In addition to recognizing the achievements of the individual or team, recognition programs can also promote the same behavior and contributions from others.

When humans are cared for properly, the quality of their work improves.¹ Similarly, when animals are cared for properly, the quality of scientific data improves.^{2,3} Culture of Care is a compelling concept to provide this level of care. Acknowledging that employees are human and make mistakes can create a safe space where people can feel empowered to actively share when things go wrong. Individuals can then work together to identify the root cause of the problem and develop a plan to avoid recurrence. Incorporating the principles of diversity and inclusion into the process ensures a well-rounded perspective is utilized.

Staff morale is another critical consideration in the culture of care. Working with animals can significantly impact the emotional and physical well-being of employees. A workplace that fosters the development of interpersonal relationships between employees helps to create an environment where peer-to-peer counseling is possible and promotes opportunities to discuss common experiences and feelings. Mental Health First Aider training is another way of supporting employee health and well-being whereby individuals receive training to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders. Morale can also be boosted through simple everyday tasks, such as positive interaction with animals. Creating a memorial to the contributions of animals in advancing human and animal health can provide a space for individuals to remember the animals that were in their care, reflect on personal experiences, and find peace or comfort.

Finally, sharing openly with people not directly involved with animal research is critical to help them understand when, why, and how we work with animals. Thoughtful creation of talking points for public outreach can help to foster a better understanding of animal research for the public. Equally, it allows for common talking points for animal scientists when asked about their role in research and the use of animal models. By publicly discussing the use of purpose bred



animals, their connections to human disease, and how we care for research animals, individuals and teams are better equipped to share their inspiring and motivating role in research and the patients they serve.

Are you interested in learning more about Culture of Care? Could your institution benefit from these initiatives? Promoting the care of people and animals in research is a rewarding investment of our time and energy. Join us for a roundtable discussion at AALAS 2023 to hear from advocates nurturing a Culture of Care across the field.

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