

ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR LABORATORY ANIMAL SCIENCE (ICLAS) IN THE PROMOTION OF CARE AND USE OF LABORATORY ANIMALS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

N. KOSTOMITSOPOULOS¹, CECILIA CARBONE², and G. DEMERS³

¹ICLAS Governing Board Member; Biomedical Research Foundation, Academy of Athens, 100 Athens, Greece

²ICLAS Secretary General; Cátedra de Animales de Laboratorio y Bioterio Fac. Cs. Veterinarias, U.N.L.P., 1900 La Plata, Republic of Argentina

³ICLAS President; 506 St-Hilaire, Québec, Canada

Abstract — The use of animals in research, teaching, and testing is regulated around the world by specific laws. Since regulatory processes are highly variable, a broad variability in the care and use of animals in scientific procedures exists internationally, as well as in the region of Southeast Europe. It is necessary to initiate an effort to promote the harmonization and improvement of laboratory animal science world-wide. The aim of this article is to explain the structure, organization, and aims of the International Council for Laboratory Animal Science (ICLAS) and to describe the role of this organization in the promotion of care and use of laboratory animals in this region of Europe.

Key words: ICLAS, laboratory animals, research, testing, laws

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INTRODUCTION

The use of laboratory animals for research, teaching, and testing purposes is regulated in almost all countries by specific laws. This legislation mainly defines administrative and authorization procedures, as well as minimum requirements for the care and use of laboratory animals. Regulatory processes are highly variable, as they are based on cultural values, public opinion, existing laws and local regulations, or even the religious beliefs existing within a particular country. Additionally, numerous guidelines issued by national and international organizations have further tried to promote the care and use of laboratory animals and improve good animal practices. In many cases, the implementation of these guidelines by institutions has been on a voluntary basis, and as a result there is now a broad variability in the care and use of animals in scientific procedures around the world.

Countries located in Southeast Europe have close cultural, historical, commercial, and in some cases religious links between them. Some

of these countries already belong to the European Union (Greece) or have recently become members (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia), while others have the status of a candidate country (Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey). Some countries are potential candidates for future EU membership (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina), while others, such as Moldavia and Ukraine, currently have no ties with the EU (European Union, 2007).

There is great variation in the implementation of legislation in regard to the care and use of laboratory animals among countries in Southeast Europe. The European Directive 86/609 on the 'Protection of Animals used for Experimental and other Scientific Purposes' was adopted by all EU members (European Union, 1986). Candidate countries have started a regulatory process for integration of the above Directive into their national legislation, while in the potential candidate countries national legislation may be in force. The philosophy of the Directive and the principles and minimum require-

ments for the care and use of laboratory animals are the same for all members of the European Union. However, implementation of the Directive varies according to the administrative structure, financial situation, public opinion, scientific knowledge, and experience of scientific and technical personnel in each country. In addition to this regulatory variability, there are also some serious differences in a number of very important areas regarding the care and use of laboratory animals, areas such as educational and training programs, ethical review processes, and even the adoption of new specifications and guidelines (European Commission, 2007).

It is abundantly clear that a mosaic of differences in the care and use of laboratory animals exists in Southeast Europe and that an effort should be initiated to promote the harmonization and improvement of laboratory animal science within the region. The aim of this article is to explain the structure, organization, and scope of the International Council for Laboratory Animal Science (ICLAS) and describe the potential role of this organization in the promotion of care and use of laboratory animals in this part of Europe.

WHAT IS ICLAS?

ICLAS is an international, non-governmental, and non-profit scientific organization, with the mission to advance human and animal health by promoting the ethical care and use of animals in research worldwide. The aims of the Organization are to promote and coordinate the development of laboratory animal science throughout the world and, as a matter of priority in developing countries, to promote international collaboration in laboratory animal science. ICLAS also aims to promote quality definition and monitoring of laboratory animals, collect and disseminate information on laboratory animal science, and promote worldwide harmonization in the care and use of laboratory animals. Furthermore, ICLAS works to foster the humane use of animals in research through recognition of ethical principles and scientific responsibilities and endeavors to promote the "Three Rs" tenet of Russell and Burch (Russell and Burch, 1959).

In keeping with its mission, ICLAS strives to act as a worldwide resource for knowledge in laboratory animal science; to be the acknowledged advocate for the advancement of laboratory animal science in developing countries and regions; and to serve as a premier source of laboratory animal science guidelines and standards and as a primary source of information on laboratory animal welfare.

ICLAS is composed of four categories of members: national members (35 countries); scientific/union members (43 associations, scientific societies, and unions); associate members (41 organizations); and honorary members (nine persons). ICLAS is governed by an Executive Committee and a Governing Board. The ICLAS Governing Board has an annual meeting in conjunction with a regional meeting, and a General Assembly is held every four years in association with an international meeting.

ICLAS runs the following programs and initiatives: regional programs; a reciprocal registration program; a communication program; the harmonization of guidelines initiative; and the animal quality network program.

ICLAS Regional Programs

ICLAS has formed six regional committees covering Europe, Asia, French-speaking Africa, English-speaking Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Regional scientific meetings and courses are organized by laboratory animal science organizations in the various regions under the auspices and with the collaboration of regional committees to ensure diffusion of scientific knowledge throughout all areas of the world.

ICLAS Reciprocal Registration Program

As an official ICLAS policy, its members are required to offer their own member registration rate to members of other ICLAS member organizations at scientific meetings. This policy was implemented with the aim of attracting new ICLAS members and to increase the number of foreign ICLAS member representatives at scientific meetings, thereby facilitating greater international collaboration in laboratory animal science (International Council for

Laboratory Animal Science, 2007a).

ICLAS Communication Program

The ICLAS FYI Bulletin is an electronic instrument that provides worldwide distribution of timely information that may be of interest to ICLAS members and which can be passed on to their constituents. An average of five bulletins is published every month to promote interaction among laboratory animal scientists around the world. This is the most extensive international communication in laboratory animal science of its kind. The ICLAS web-page (www.iclas.org) has been developed to provide various items of information on ICLAS programs and ICLAS activities. This information is important for both existing and potential members of the organization.

ICLAS Initiatives

Harmonization of guidelines for the use of animals in research

The harmonization of existing guidelines for the use of animals in research, teaching, and testing is an emerging issue in the context of globalization of research around the world. ICLAS, as an international umbrella organization, could act as a facilitator in this area. Since 2004, ICLAS has implemented an ICLAS Working Group on Harmonization of Guidelines. The goal is to identify already existing guidelines that could be recognized as international reference documents (Demers et al., 2006).

ICLAS supports the harmonization of animal care and use policies, guidelines, and other forms of regulation on a worldwide basis as a reflection of the globalization of research. This, however, does not mean standardization, since ICLAS considers that each country should be able to maintain an animal welfare system that reflects its own culture, traditions, religions, laws, and regulations.

ICLAS Animal Quality Network Program

ICLAS has always emphasized international harmonization in regard to the quality of laboratory animals and the ethics of animal experimentation with the overall goal of improving scientific and

ethical standards. The aims of the program are to create a network of laboratories involved in either health monitoring and/or genetics of laboratory animals; to promote and maintain the use of high-quality animal models worldwide, as well as the harmonization of guidelines; to facilitate exchange of information; and to spread knowledge and awareness of the importance of high-quality laboratory animals among the scientific community.

Other objectives of the program are to develop activities that will fulfil the ICLAS goal of improving the quality of animals used in research and to organize workshops of interest. At least one scientific workshop will be organized every four years to coincide with the ICLAS General Assembly.

The network's first initiative – the ICLAS Performance Evaluation Program – began trials in 2007. This program will focus on health monitoring in order to provide diagnostic laboratories with a mechanism for self-evaluating assay performance and thereby help to assure the quality of laboratory animals used in research (International Council for Laboratory Animal Science, 2007b).

HOW ICLAS CAN PROMOTE THE CARE AND USE OF LABORATORY ANIMALS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

In those countries of Southeast Europe which are not yet full members of the European Union, different approaches exist for the care and use of laboratory animals. Therefore, an effort should be initiated to create links between scientists in those countries working in the field of laboratory animal science to help improve coordination. In this sense ICLAS can contribute to the creation of a network for the promotion of good animal practices in the region. The ICLAS Regional Committee for Europe can support the co-organization of scientific meetings together with national laboratory animal science associations, universities, institutions, or other relevant national organizations. These meetings will be addressed to scientists from different neighboring countries to promote better human and scientific relationships.

A first step has already been taken at the 1st East Mediterranean ICLAS Symposium, organized and hosted by the Biomedical Research Foundation of the Academy of Athens in Athens on May 30-31, 2005. Scientists from Balkan and East Mediterranean countries came together and an active network was established. It was attended by 110 participants from seven countries (Bulgaria, Israel, Turkey, Syria, Tunis, Slovakia, and Greece). The Symposium was addressed by 18 well-known international scientists, who gave lectures on the most important and up-to-date topics of laboratory animal science. Topics included laboratory animal housing and management, transgenic animals, the ethical review process, improvement of animal welfare, health monitoring programs, and occupational health and safety.

Organization of the 2nd Symposium in Israel, in collaboration with the Israel Laboratory Animal Forum (ILAF), is already scheduled for October 2008. The main aim of this Symposium will be to further strengthen the links between laboratory animal scientists in that part of the world.

ICLAS could also promote the care and ethical use of laboratory animals through active participation in the organization of educational courses and seminars for scientists and technicians in those countries. This could be achieved by providing financial support to offer more scientists the opportunity to attend regional meetings or by suggesting outstanding scientists as speakers.

National scientific organizations concerned with the encouragement and quality of scientific research using laboratory animals, laboratory animal science associations, or other organizations in sympathy with the goals of ICLAS are invited to become members and actively participate in the development of ICLAS programs in Southeast Europe.

ICLAS, as an international umbrella organization, can be officially cited in cases where there is a lack of national legislation on the protection of laboratory animals.

CONCLUSION

ICLAS is an international non-governmental and

non-profit scientific organization aiming to promote human and animal health by securing the ethical care and use of animals in research worldwide. ICLAS's aims of promoting the world-wide dissemination of information and knowledge of good science and good, modern animal practices worldwide are achieved through ICLAS meetings, ICLAS regional programs, the ICLAS Communication Program, and ICLAS initiatives such as the ICLAS Animal Quality Network Program.

ICLAS can play an important role in the promotion of care and use of laboratory animals in Southeast Europe. The creation of an active network to bring together scientists working in the field of laboratory animal science and the co-organization of scientific meetings are things the Regional Committee has already achieved.

The active participation of national laboratory animal science associations and scientific organizations from Southeast European countries in ICLAS activities and their contribution to different ICLAS programs will definitely improve laboratory animal science and lead to better laboratory animal practices in this region of the world.

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