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The Case of the (Over) Zealous IACUC Member

Every IACUC seems to have one or two members who review protocols more thoroughly than others, and Great Eastern University's IACUC was no exception. Dr. Cynthia Chow took her IACUC responsibility quite seriously. She read each of the protocols to be discussed at Committee meetings and was particularly thorough with those specifically assigned to her. Chow was a tenured professor who was not shy about voicing her concerns. The problem, as some IACUC members saw it, was that Chow was too thorough and demanded too much of their time. Even Steve Drucker, the normally unflappable IACUC Chairman, was becoming weary of 5- and 6-hour meetings.

The University's IACUC had a pre-review process designed to allow the Attending Veterinarian (AV) to review and comment on pain and distress issues, as well as to try to catch and eliminate most of the obvious shortcomings in a protocol before it went to full-Committee review. Even though this system worked reasonably well, Chow usually had multiple questions at the time of the meeting. After one lengthy session Drucker spoke privately with Chow and asked her to "back off" somewhat. "Why," said Chow, "are my questions too picky or irrelevant?" "A few are," said Drucker, "but no more so than those of some other members. It's just that you have so many questions that the meetings get bogged down. Do you think you could just focus on direct animal well-being issues and let somebody else worry about animal numbers, the rationale for animal use, and similar items?" Chow was surprised because she did not see how questioning the number of animals to be used was anything but a well-being issue. Nevertheless, she said she would try to be more reserved with her questions.

For a short time there was some noticeable change, but soon Chow had returned

to her intensive questioning. Drucker knew that he had to do something or he would have Committee members resigning. He began by assigning Chow fewer protocols for pre-review and presentation to the full Committee. This helped a little. Then he started limiting Chow's discussions by calling for a vote. This also helped, but it upset Chow and a few other members. Some of them briefly spoke up on her behalf, saying that she was simply trying to assure animal welfare. Most said nothing. Frustrated, Chow complained to Wesley Stanner, the Institutional Official (IO), but she did not find a sympathetic ear. The IACUC was getting its work done legally and more efficiently, so Stanner was not about to rock the boat. However, Chow was becoming angrier as time passed. She confided to a few friends that she might complain to the NIH, although she didn't think it would have any effect because the IACUC was acting legally, though not nearly as effectively as it should be.

Is there any hope for Chow, a well-meaning IACUC member who was taking up far more of the Committee's time than it was willing to expend? Is there some common ground to be found?

What is the Real Issue?

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It is clear that Chow is profoundly distrustful of Great Eastern's IACUC protocol review procedure, and the number of questions that she raised suggests that the consultancy process during protocol review is flawed. Let us assume that, as indicated, her real motive is good study design and quality animal care and welfare, and that Chow's

selection as a Committee member was based on the value of her contribution. Then Drucker's actions in asking her to "back off" and restrict questions—even asking, "Do you think you could just focus on direct animal well-being issues and let somebody else worry about animal numbers?" then reducing her involvement in the Committee—could have led her and other members of the Committee to suspect either that there may be a coverup or that time was more essential than the real issues. There are a number of ways to address this situation.

The pre-review process appears to be very restrictive, in that only the AV reviews and comments on pain and distress issues. Surely at this initial stage there should be encouragement of a wider debate on all the issues involved with the application, thus allowing members of the Committee, perhaps via an email group, to review the protocol, raise questions, and collate those of similar concerns with the applicant, the AV, and animal care technicians. Such procedures would be beneficial to both the Committee's objectives and the welfare of the animals to be used.

The Committee members could initially receive a lay summary and overview of the project including details of statistical study design as to the manner in which the species and numbers of animals to be used had been decided, rather than waiting until the formal meeting, which seems to be somewhat "time restricted". This would serve two purposes: to allay any fears Chow and her supporters may have of not being allowed to make a valuable contribution to the review, and also to reduce the time spent on individual protocol reviews at the formal meeting.

At the formal meeting, after a brief final review, the Committee could then present any contentious issues raised to the appli-