

Visiting the animal unit

Aim of this resource

To help IACUC members prepare for a visit to the animal unit.

Relevant IACUC task

Conducting facility inspections and reviewing the standards of care and facilities for animals.

Recommendation

Think in advance about the purposes and aims of your visit and take time to prepare for it.



The issue

The way that animals are housed and cared for within an institution is really important - for achieving both good animal welfare and good quality science. All IACUC members should regularly visit the animal unit. You should be offered visits, or feel able to ask for them (and have your request accepted).

Looking at the animals, and their housing, is just one aspect - visits are also important opportunities to meet people and find out more about the institution's culture. Make sure you can feed back and discuss your experiences.

Key points:

- Before visiting the animal facility, think about what you would like to achieve. Your visit provides important opportunities to see and discuss how animals are housed and cared for, to help develop good staff-IACUC relations, and help you find out about the institution's 'culture'.
- Ask which species you will see, so that you can find out in advance about the needs of these animals, and look up good practice guidelines.
- Take the opportunity to talk informally with animal technicians and care staff about their work, the science, animal welfare, and any particular challenges they face.
- Ask staff about the resources they have available for making improvements and to show you examples of refinements they have introduced to improve animal housing and care.
- Have discussions with staff members about their own experiences of working in the unit - both positive and negative.
- Look out for 'feel-good' or 'feel-bad' factors which may indicate the overall culture of the institution.
- Make sure you have a proper look at the animals, taking advice from staff on how to behave and interact with animals so as to minimise stress. Ask about what you see.
- Consider whether something would seem odd if you saw it in a companion animal. If in doubt, start a discussion. If you have concerns, raise these with staff members and report back to others after your visit if necessary.
- It can be helpful to visit with one or more other IACUC members to compare perspectives on what you see and hear.
- Following your visit, you might want to ask for a debrief as an IACUC agenda item.

Background information:

- **It is essential for IACUC members to visit the animal unit.** Visits will help you to: set a context for the animal use you review, find out more about animals' experiences, and better understand the institution's culture. You may also be able to see particular protocols carried out and/or learn about their effects on animals. Visiting the animal unit should enable you to meet a wide range of staff, and also give them the opportunity to get to know IACUC members. It is a good idea to think about all of these aims and keep them in mind, to get the most out of your visit.
- **There are three key areas to look out for:** animal **housing**, including the quality and quantity of space; animal **care**, including staff attitudes and morale; and animal **welfare** – how the animals look and behave. You do not have to be an expert in any of these areas; your questions should be welcomed and there are some materials to help you (see below).
- **Animal housing standards are set out in the [Guidelines for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals](#).** This includes species-specific minimum legal standards for enclosure sizes, stocking densities, group housing social animals, diet, 'enrichment', and environmental conditions such as temperature. These standards are not the same as 'best practice' and institutions may go beyond simply complying with them – you should ask how the institution achieves this. If any exemptions from meeting the minimum standards have been allowed for scientific reasons (for example, singly housing social animals after surgery) you could ask for more information and an explanation of how the welfare impact is minimised.
- **There are online resources which set out good practice for housing, husbandry, and care.** Examples are available from the [RSPCA](#), [NC3Rs](#), and [Norecopa](#). You might like to look at these before your visit. You could also ask how new information on refining housing and care is identified, evaluated, and implemented in the animal house.
- **Visits should enable you to talk informally with animal technicians and care staff, to better understand their views on animal welfare and use and the ethical issues arising.** Examples of useful topics include: is there a policy on exercise and socialisation? What are people's views on: rehoming animals, evaluating environmental enrichment, and the value of the IACUC? Do they recognise that common husbandry procedures like cage cleaning can be stressful to animals? Do staff discuss the science with researchers? For more discussion points, see p. 46 of [Guiding Principles on Good Practice for AWERBs/IACUCs](#).
- **Have discussions with staff about their own experiences – both positive and negative.** This can help indicate whether there are good interactions and communication between animal technicians, named persons, vets, and scientists. You can also ask staff whether there is anything they think could be changed or improved, whether they feel they receive appropriate training, and whether they feel their views are valued. How do animal technicians feel about doing procedures and killing animals? Is their 'emotional labour' recognised? See [The Cost of Caring](#) for more information.
- **Look out for any 'feel-good' or 'feel-bad' factors which may indicate the overall culture of the institution.** 'Feel-good' factors might include: happy staff, affection towards animals, animals with names, a good understanding of animal behaviour, and staff reflecting on the ethics of animal use. 'Feel-bad' factors might include: staff who look overworked or seem stressed, inappropriate interpretation of animal behaviour, an unwillingness to discuss welfare issues, and being dismissive towards new ideas. Have a look around the walls of the unit – are there positive, welfare, or 3Rs-focused materials (e.g. posters) on display?
- **A good Culture of Care is essential, and should be evident in the way people treat one another (including you) as well as the animals.** You can find out more about this in the

RSPCA info sheet, Chapter 11 of the [Guiding Principles for AWERBs/IACUCs](#), and the [Norecopa web page](#). Staff should welcome your feedback about institution culture and you should have opportunities to debrief and discuss this with the IACUC.

- **Make sure you get a chance to have a proper look at the animals.** This is obviously a main reason for visiting, but be aware that you will be a stranger and your presence can influence animal behaviour. New people or sudden noises can be startling, and animals of different species may respond differently to human body language. For example, it may be acceptable to stare at a cage of mice from across a room, but many primates would find this threatening. Ask staff to advise you on how to behave and interact with the animals to minimise any stress. You should be able to ask to access any room unless there is a scientific or biosecurity-based reason to stay away. You should also be able to ask what procedures will be done to any animal, and what severity limit these will have.
- **Consider whether something would seem odd if you saw it in a companion animal.** Lab animals are clearly not 'pets', but any given species has the same behaviours and welfare needs, regardless of where individuals are kept. If you are unsure about an animal's behaviour or living environment, ask a question. Useful 'lay' questions include: Why is that mouse circling repeatedly? Is that dog afraid? Why is that mouse's fur patchy or standing on end? Why is this animal kept on his own? How much pain relief do animals get after surgery? Why don't the zebrafish have any environmental enrichment? How are the mice picked up and handled? Do the animals get bored? How do you know when animals are feeling good, with positive welfare?
- **It can be helpful to visit with one or more other IACUC members to compare perspectives on what you see.** This may be particularly useful in informing the discussions around protocol applications or review, or for topics that arise from IACUC meetings (such as understanding husbandry issues or new protocols).
- **If you have concerns during your visit, raise these with staff members. If you are still concerned, you can report back to others, such as the animal welfare officer or IACUC after your visit.** Ask constructive questions at the time, and try to keep the discussion going. It is important to be honest about what you think and make sure any concerns are followed up.