

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Appointment of the Committee and its Terms of Reference

1.1 The Senate appointed the Select Committee on Animal Welfare on 16 and 17 November 1983 and reappointed it on 22 February 1985 and again on 22 September 1987, in each new Parliament, to inquire into and report upon:

the question of animal welfare in Australia with particular reference to:

- (a) interstate and overseas commerce in animals;
- (b) wildlife protection and harvesting;
- (c) animal experimentation;
- (d) codes of practice of animal husbandry for all species;
- (e) the use of animals in sport.

1.2 Because of the wide scope of the terms of reference, the Committee decided to divide the inquiry into a number of discrete areas and, as far as possible, to examine two or more simultaneously.

1.3 Although the Committee took a little evidence on animal experimentation in preliminary public hearings in mid-1984, the Committee decided to defer its consideration of this area in order to give priority to investigations into kangaroos, the export of live sheep from Australia and the keeping of dolphins and whales in captivity. The Committee reported on live sheep exports on 13 August 1985, on dolphins and whales in captivity on 29 November 1985 and on kangaroos on 1 June 1988. The Committee has also been examining animal welfare issues in sheep husbandry and has taken evidence in other areas of animal husbandry.

Conduct of the Inquiry

1.4 In this report the Committee examines the use of animals in experiments in research and toxicological testing but not, except in some peripheral areas, in teaching. The Committee has taken very little evidence on the use of animals in primary and secondary schools while its consideration of their use in tertiary courses has not been extensive. This area will therefore be taken up later in the Committee's general inquiry into animal welfare.

1.5 Some preliminary evidence on the use of animals in research and teaching was taken during hearings of the Committee between May and September 1984. The evidence taken then made it clear to the Committee that publicly available information on the extent and nature of the use of animals in experiments in Australia was extremely limited.

1.6 In order to obtain information about animal experimentation in Australia to help prepare for further hearings, the Committee prepared a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered the nature and extent of animal use; the development of alternatives; the constitution, operation and membership of ethics committees; compliance with the Code of Practice; animal supply; animal house facilities; and animal house staff.

1.7 The questionnaire was sent to universities, hospitals and other research institutions that were known to use animals in research and teaching. Fifty completed questionnaires were returned to the Committee. Additional copies of those completed by universities were sent to the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) by arrangement between the Committee and the AVCC.

1.8 The Committee held hearings and conducted inspections of animal house facilities at universities and other institutions in all State capitals and Canberra between August 1986 and November 1988. The Committee received submissions and took oral evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals. A list of witnesses who gave oral evidence is provided in Appendix 1.

Nomenclature

1.9 During the inquiry, the Committee found that people used different terms to describe the same thing. The Committee decided, in order to avoid confusion, to standardise as far as possible on key terms in this report.

1.10 A person who conducts experiments on animals is called a researcher by some people, an investigator, an experimenter or a scientist by others. The Committee has decided to refer to such a person as an experimenter or scientist, depending on context.

1.11 An application to carry out a project in which experiments are conducted on animals is referred to as a protocol. Although the word 'proposal' is used in the Code of Practice, the meaning of the word may be confused with the more general meaning of the word in some contexts. Such ambiguity is not likely to happen with the word 'protocol'.

1.12 The term 'Code of Practice' refers specifically to the 'Code of practice for the care and use of animals for experimental purposes' which was issued in 1985 by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC). The Code of Practice has recently been revised but the revised edition has not yet been endorsed by all of its sponsors. The latest draft given to the Committee by the NHMRC was dated 22 February 1989. It is referred to in this report as the 'draft revised Code of Practice.'

1.13 The Committee uses the term 'ethics committee' to denote the term 'animal experimentation ethics committee' used in the Code of Practice or 'animal care and ethics committee' used in New South Wales legislation or the variations of it used in some institutions.

1.14 A list of acronyms and abbreviations used in the report is set out at the front of the report.

Animal Experimentation Debate

1.15 Animal experimentation has been an area of animal use that has been at the forefront of the animal welfare debate for a long time. In the United Kingdom, anti-vivisection organisations have opposed the use of animals in experiments for two hundred years or more. At the birth of the current animal welfare movement in Australia in the mid 1970s, animal experimentation was identified as a key area of animal use for abolition or reform.

1.16 The animal welfare movement in Australia is not a homogeneous body with a single set of policies. Its constituent organisations have differing policies on animal experimentation and other animal welfare issues. Although some of those organisations espouse an uncompromising policy of immediate abolition of the use of animals in experiments, other organisations, while maintaining a long-term goal of abolition, take a more pragmatic position by seeking reforms in the short term to enhance animal welfare.

1.17 A diversity of views on animal experimentation also exists within the scientific community. The Committee acknowledges marked changes in attitude towards animal experimentation even during the course of its inquiry. The questionnaire distributed to some 50 institutions and the long

series of public hearings focussed attention on the subject. It made institutions and experimenters think more about the ethical, welfare and scientific issues involved in animal experimentation. In many institutions, ethics committees are now working better, controls have been tightened, facilities have been upgraded and greater attention has been paid to the care of animals. There is also a growing realisation within the scientific community that reproducible experimental data requires a close definition of the health and genetic status of the animals used in the experiments. Better facilities will be needed to provide the higher quality animals which are now required in many research projects.

1.18 The Committee distributed the questionnaire because of the paucity of information publicly available about the use of animals in experiments in Australia. Experimenters and scientific institutions have traditionally been reluctant to disseminate information about their use of animals and the facilities in which they are housed. This attitude has been adopted largely as a reaction to opposition to animal experimentation from various animal welfare organisations. Some issues focussed on by such organisations have been blown out of perspective by the media. Added to this have been the acts of wanton vandalism against institutions or personal property of experimenters perpetrated by fringe elements of the animal welfare movement. Fortunately, the extent of such criminal activity in Australia has been minimal compared to the level of violent activities in some other countries. Nevertheless, it has been a matter of concern to experimenters and research institutions.

1.19 There is no doubt that the majority of the population supports biomedical research involving the use of animals¹ provided that effective controls are operating to keep the number of the animals and the level of pain and distress to a minimum. Until such time as the majority of Australians are persuaded that

animal experimentation should not be carried out, and that is translated into legislative form, experimenters have a right to use animals within the regulations and guidelines imposed on such use by government and the scientific community.

1.20 The Committee condemns the use of violence to attain objectives which cannot be attained by rational argument or legitimate and lawful activity. Violence causes revulsion and is in most cases counter-productive. It will also adversely affect the work of other organisations and individuals who are striving to improve animal welfare and reduce the number of animals being used in experiments by legitimate means. Those people who pursue their cause by illegal means should be subject to the full force of the law.

1.21 There is a general feeling within the scientific community to withdraw behind barriers when faced with violence or other illegal actions. That attitude is quite understandable. Yet it has been the secretive approach in the past and the reluctance to publish information about their use of animals in experiments which have led to public misapprehension about the nature of animal experimentation in this country. Secrecy breeds suspicion and the media feed on suspicion. What might have been a misunderstanding becomes a crisis.

1.22 The most potent weapon in the armoury of research institutions is public opinion. If the public is satisfied that animals are being used humanely in experiments, there is little threat to such use. It is important, therefore, for institutions to be open and forthcoming about their experimental practices. Responsible animal welfare organisations should also be able to inspect institutional facilities. This would help to allay suspicions that animals are being housed in poor facilities or are not being given proper care.

1.23 Institutions and government have a responsibility to ensure that animal experimentation is conducted humanely in accordance with approved rules and guidelines. By fulfilling that responsibility and by keeping the public informed of the extent and nature of animal experimentation, public disquiet should be kept to a minimum.

Acknowledgements

1.24 The Committee wishes to thank all the people who made submissions, gave evidence or otherwise contributed to the inquiry. In particular, it wishes to thank the staff of the Committee: Mr P. Barsdell, Mr D. Hynd, Ms B. Allan and Mrs D. Pratezina.