

Management of animal welfare matters in the University Veterinarian's absence

1. Background

The University Veterinarian (UV) provides veterinary advice to University of Tasmania animal users, facility managers and animal-care staff. Such advice is often sought when an animal or group of animals shows signs of ill health or injury.

Due to the nature of the research undertaken at the University, it is usually impractical to embark on specific medical or surgical treatment options for individual or small groups of animals. In most cases, a decision is reached between the UV, facility manager or Responsible Investigator about whether such animals should be humanely culled to prevent further suffering or whether they should be monitored for a set period of time to allow spontaneous recovery.

Most AEC approved project applications contain detailed information regarding the threshold for humane culling. In these instances, an animal is culled when it displays a set of previously defined signs.

Responsible Investigators (RIs) and facility managers (FMs) are required to have a comprehensive knowledge of the care and husbandry requirements of the species in their charge and this includes a knowledge of physical and behavioural signs of poor welfare or suffering. This knowledge enables them to make decisions regarding the welfare of animals in their care independent of the UV, if necessary. Furthermore, both RIs and FMs are either themselves proficient in humane euthanasia techniques suitable for their species, or have ready access to a person proficient in such techniques (e.g., a local veterinary surgeon). As such, it is unlikely that the UV will be required to attend an animal solely for the purposes of euthanasia.

2. Legislation

The Animal Welfare Act 1993 (Tas) requires that persons who have care or charge of animal take all reasonable measures to ensure the welfare of that animal. In an emergency, where an animal is suffering, this would include humanely culling the animal to prevent further suffering. There is no legal requirement to seek veterinary advice prior to culling.

Furthermore, euthanasia is not defined as a veterinary service under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1986 (Tas) or Regulations 2012 (Tas) and can be conducted by any person as long as the act of euthanasia does not cause undue suffering.

The only exception to the above is culling of species protected under the Threatened Species Protection Act 1995 (Tas). Culling of these animals is an offence unless authorised by a Scientific Permit or another appropriate authority (e.g., a registered veterinary surgeon).

3. Protocol

When the University Veterinarian is absent, the following protocol should be followed:

For non-threatened species:

- Any animals showing signs of injury, illness or behavioural abnormality must be brought to the attention of the RI or FM without delay.
- The RI or FM does not need to attend the animal but must gather sufficient information about the animal to be able to determine whether it is suffering and what the degree of suffering is likely to be.
- If the animal is part of an AEC approved project, the humane endpoints for that project must be consulted to determine whether the animal fits the criteria for humane culling. If the animal does not fit the criteria for culling, steps should be taken to safeguard animal welfare until the UV returns. These steps should include a plan for monitoring the animal and reassessing welfare at least once daily. An appropriate monitoring sheet should be used to record details of monitoring and the findings of any welfare-related assessments.
- If the animal is not part of an AEC approved project, or humane endpoints are not included in the approved application, the RI or FM should determine, based on their knowledge of the species, whether the animal should be culled or whether other steps should be taken to safeguard its welfare until the UV returns. These steps should include a plan for monitoring the animal and reassessing welfare at least once daily. An appropriate monitoring sheet should be used to record details of monitoring and the findings of any welfare-related assessments.
- If the animal is culled, euthanasia must be conducted in a manner appropriate for that species and by a person experienced in the method used.
- If the RI or FM cannot determine whether euthanasia is warranted, or if facilities or experienced persons are not available, a local veterinary surgeon should be contacted for further advice.

For threatened species:

- Any animals showing signs of injury, illness or behavioural abnormality must be brought to the attention of the RI without delay.
- The AEC approved application and Scientific Permit must be consulted and followed for any specific instructions relating to animal welfare.
- If the application or Permit do not contain explicit instructions allowing humane euthanasia, a local veterinary surgeon must be contacted for further advice.

4. Notifying the University Veterinarian.

The UV should be notified of any unwell animals that require his/her attention upon his/her return.

The UV does not need to be notified of any animals culled, unless the incident constitutes an Unexpected Adverse Event or unless the RI or FM considers the incident to be particularly unusual or concerning.

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