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For Immediate Release

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MIDDLETOWN, CT--Results from a study published in the July 27 issue of *Science* suggest that the approval decisions made by university animal use committees in the United States are unreliable when it comes to experimental procedures involving animals.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the study was conducted by Scott Plous of Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, and Harold Herzog of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC.

The investigation, which took three years to complete, compared judgments made by 50 randomly selected animal care and use committees drawn from U.S. colleges and universities. To assess the consistency of approval decisions, 150 recent research proposals from these institutions were each independently evaluated by two different animal care and use committees.

The results showed that approval decisions were statistically unrelated. In most cases, proposals that were disapproved by one committee were approved by the second committee.

The study also explored whether reviews were more reliable when the experiment involved certain types of animals or procedures. For example, reliability was assessed for proposals that involved dogs, cats, and primates, or for experiments involving drugs, surgery, animal pain, or death. Even in these cases, independent reviews did not agree beyond chance levels.

"The people who serve on animal use committees have been put in a difficult situation," Plous says. "They try hard to make good decisions, but they aren't given the kind of detailed, standardized guidelines necessary for a reliable review."

Herzog agrees: "As an animal researcher, I was surprised by the results. These committee members are smart, dedicated people. If the reliability of their proposal reviews is at chance levels -- literally, a coin toss -- then the review system needs to be fixed."

Plous and Herzog hope their results will prompt a reevaluation of the way animal research proposals are approved. Similar reevaluations have taken place with respect to research on human participants, but the approval process for animal research has been largely unchanged since Congress first mandated it in the mid-1980s.

Under U.S. law, most research institutions must establish an animal use committee to review proposed experiments and assure they meet federal guidelines. If a proposal fails to meet federal guidelines, the committee is required to reject it or call for changes before the experiment can take place.

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