How much do animals suffer in this country in the name of science?  

BY ALISTAIR BONE

Determining how much an animal suffers during vivisection is a tricky business, due mostly to their inability to complain. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) provides helpful tips for all species. Three hundred horses or donkeys were used in animal testing last year, three percent were eventually killed. In prolonged pain horses exhibit symptoms from “... restlessness to depression. ... When near collapse, the horse may stand very quietly, rigid and unmoving.” Calf (309 used, eight percent killed) should be young, healthy, socialised to humans and “... in severe pain may be howl and show domesitcated behaviour with desperate attempts to escape”. With rabbits (2785 used, 90 percent killed) “... acute pain may result in vocalisation.

Research organisations sent reports to MAF on how much animals in their care have suffered. MAF in turn provides them with a guiding reference document to animal pain. Examples of procedures that should be reported as “severe suffering” include “recovery from major surgery without the use of analgesic, marked social or environmental deprivation, the induction of severe diarrhoea, severe infectious pneumonia or severe aggressive behaviour”. Actions causing “very severe suffering” include “conducting major surgery without the use of anaesthesia where animals are immobilised physically or with the use of muscle relaxants, studies of the recovery from third degree burns or serious traumatic injuries, induction of psychotic-like behaviour or agonistic interactions that lead to severe injury or death”. David Bayvel, MAF’s director of animal welfare, says that in his experience institutions tend to err on the side of caution, reporting experiments as more rather than less severe.

Last year 10 rabbits, 186 rats, 798 guinea pigs and more than 13,000 mice suffered “very severely” – the official definition is six that “... causes stress or pain of a severe intensity for a long duration or of a very severe intensity for any duration”.

The National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC), which advises the Minister of Agriculture on animal testing, says that over 318,000 animals were used in research experiments in 2001, with 17,265 subjected to “severe” or “very severe suffering”.

But who is doing exactly what to which is difficult to know. Animal rights groups say that the system is not sufficiently transparent. Specific details of animal use may be obtained under the Official Information Act where that applies, but 24 percent of animal testing last year was commercial work, where procedures may be commercially sensitive. MAF also advises, “It would be acceptable to withhold the names of persons involved in a protocol and the specific location of where the manipulation is taking place”, due to threats from “extremists”.

Anyone wanting to work on live animals has to gain approval from one of 46 Animal Ethics Committees (AECs). Each AEC contains three independent members, who have to determine that the pain caused to an animal is justified by the knowledge gained. Members can inspect premises and witness experiments any time they wish. No complaints have ever been received from an AEC about the conduct of an experiment. Bayvel has faith in the system. “Some people are not convinced that the AECs are effective. But from our point of view, with the three external members, there are plenty of checks and balances to ensure complaints would be aired. In many cases they are weighing up a very difficult decision.”

The NAEAC has a policy of “Reduction, Replacement and Refinement” (the three Rs) toward animal testing. This may be a bit of a misnomer. Last year’s use of 318,583 animals was second only to 324,395 in 2000. “What is driving the total is the quantum of authorised, ethically justified research,” says Bayvel, the need for which may fluctuate with such things as outbreaks of animal diseases and the appearance of new drugs that have to be tested.

A newsletter from the Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching (ANZCART) notes that the number of animals used will not necessarily fall. It says that the ethical imperative in the application of the three Rs is “the use of the appropriate number of animals to achieve meaningful results. This may, or may not, involve a decrease in animal numbers. Indeed, in certain circumstances, more animals may be needed.”