Royal Veterinary College
University of London

Summary Minutes for the website: AWERB Standing Agenda Items meeting

Status: FINAL

Meeting held: Thursday 5 June 2025 at 10am

Present:
17 plus one in attendance, one by invitation and 12 apologies

1 WELCOME

A new AWERB member was welcomed to her first official meeting. It was noted that she had attended previously as an observer.

2 MID TERM REVIEW OF A PROJECT LICENCE

The Project licence holder (PPL Holder) was welcomed to the meeting. They were attending to present the mid-term review on the work with the DMD dogs. The PPL Holder started by providing an overview of DMD, explaining that it was the most common lethal inherited disorder diagnosed in childhood, that was seen predominantly, although not always, in young boys. The disease has 100% mortality, with young men dying typically in their 20s or early 30s. The disease is related to an absence of a protein (dystrophin) in skeletal muscle and other tissues.

There are many clinical trials taking place trying to come up with a treatment. However, there are often challenges with these trials, including patient suitability; a hesitancy from families about their child taking part in case it precludes them from taking part in what might be a more suitable clinical trial further on and difficulties in conducting placebo-based trials. Because of all these issues with clinical trials in humans, using validated animal models (such as mice models) was really crucial for the translation of therapeutics. However there were limitations with the mouse models too as they typically fail to display a relevant phenotype, which means they are largely unsuitable for testing new treatments for their ability to produce functional improvements.

The PPL Holder explained the background to how the dog model was originally founded: a dog had been brought in as a patient and examinations identified that there was an absence of dystrophin in the skeletal and cardiac muscle causing detectable functional muscle abnormalities. It was realised that if dogs could be bred with the same gene defect as this one, they would be very important for testing a number of different clinical treatments that were being evaluated at the time. Funding was obtained to develop a colony of these animals in order to identify biomarkers suitable for treatment trials.

The PPL Holder provided updates from several subsequent studies including:

- summarising key findings from a Natural History study: activity monitoring, muscle strength measurement, biomarkers, histological features and cardiac phenotype.
- therapeutic Investigations that used AAV-based gene therapy and the challenges of immune responses

- a drug aimed at counteracting immune responses in gene therapy.
- Gene Therapy trial: early encouraging results

A query was raised about the recent pilot study which had involved the DMD dogs receiving subcutaneous injections of a new therapeutic drug. The dogs had vocalised during and immediately after the dosing (although no other aversive behaviour had been seen) and they were otherwise interactive. Were any more similar types of studies planned? The PPL Holder confirmed that there was nothing currently planned. It was recognised that the study had been challenging and that the advice provided by AWERB and the Ethics and Welfare Committee had been taken on board in case it was decided to do a similar study in the future.

The PPL Holder was thanked for the excellent mid term review presentation. Its thoroughness was acknowledged and also the openness of the data that had been shared. It was an excellent example of how mid term reviews should be given.

3 ANNUAL REPORTS FROM PPL HOLDERS THAT INVOLVE SPECIAL SPECIES (DOGS AND HORSES)

Following the above agenda item, AWERB decided that annual reviews for project licences that used special species should be implemented, in addition to the mid and end of PPL reviews.

It was noted that there were currently only two licences that used special species (dogs): the one above and another which was a clinical veterinary studies project licence, that consisted of protocols that permitted the conduct of clinical trials of new drugs, devices and techniques in client owned animals in a veterinary environment with spontaneously occurring diseases. For this licence, it would be most beneficial to receive updates for each individual protocol as it finished, on how that work had gone. Amendments should also be submitted to remove a protocol once it had finished, so the licence only contained current and active protocols.

In addition, PPL Holders involved in long term studies, should be asked to present annual updates on their work.

4 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 02 April 2025 were formally signed off.

5 ACTION LOG

5.1 Item 10: AWERB's role in project licence reviews (02 April 2025 meeting)

AWERB's role and the importance of taking into account the whole aspect of animal welfare is being emphasised at PPL Holders training courses.

5.2 Item 3.1: BOAS proposal discussion (02 April 2025 meeting)

The client has been informed of AWERB's decision that this project would not be progressed. They had been very understanding and were apparently considering other uses for the product.

5.3 Item 3.2: Internal Tissue Requests form (02 April 2025 meeting)

This had been circulated for AWERB to review and sign off.

5.4 Item 3.4: Ferrets: project licence review (2 April 2025 meeting)

A meeting has been held between the project licence holder and the NVS to go through data but no trends were identified to cause any concerns.

There had however since been another ferret euthanised due to a dislodged headcap issue. For this one, there had been a welfare issue flagged prior to the headcap being dislodged, as a bit of food in the ferret's mouth had caused it to cough. This was being investigated, in case she had accidentally bashed her head in trying to get the food out. Further investigations were needed. An assessment

had also been undertaken by the project licence holder following the recent implant failures where it had been concluded that there would have been no pain associated with the implant failure as there were no signs of inflammation or anything showing as overly abnormal on the histopathology.

An additional query was raised about whether the loss of these ferrets was having an impact on the science. AWERB were advised that although the situation was not ideal, it was still possible to obtain data from the tissues.

5.5 Item 4.6: Enrichment seminar (19 March 2025)

This was currently in the planning stages. Work on this was already resulting in changes being implemented on the ground in relation to turkeys and the dogs.

5.6 Item 5 Culture of Care meeting (2 April 2025)

One meeting had been held so far. The next one needed to be arranged.

6 MEETINGS ATTENDED

6.1 ASC AWERB Hub Workshop: 2nd April 2025

Feedback on this workshop was provided. It had focused on how AWERBs can challenge researchers to demonstrate that they have made a determined effort to replace animals with alternatives, or, if replacement is impossible, that they have designed their experiments to involve the smallest number of animals and have refined their procedures to keep pain, suffering and distress to a minimum. One focus is on providing support to researchers to transition to using non-animal models including organs-on-chips technology and the real drive to move away from animal models across the world.

AWERB were reminded about a "Replacement Checklist" put together by "Replacing animals in research", which is intended to be a tool to improve existing frameworks and processes. It's a list of simple questions with prompts, so that both researchers and reviewers can be informed of the actions required of them when demonstrating that replacement has been fulfilled:

- Reviewing Current Guidance for the "R" of Replacement and Rethinking it with the "Replacement Checklist".
- Replacement Checklist

These should be reviewed by AWERB to see if elements could be incorporated into AWERB documents/guidelines. In particular asking PPL Holders to provide evidence that they have looked into whether there were alternative replacement alternatives for their animal methods.

Another member reported on a 3Rs training webinar that had been attended: "Breaking the Gold standard – the social barriers to non-animal research methods" which had explored why animal experimentation continues to dominate scientific research. The links referred to at the seminar would be circulated as well a copy of a Norecopa slide on how to seek alternative methods.

It was recognised that one of the barriers to researchers considering alternative methods was that papers were more likely to be published in high impact journals if an animal model has been used versus an in-vitro model.

7 REHOMING OF ANIMALS

It was highlighted that interest in rehoming small animals that were available had dropped off. It was thought that this could partly be due to the increase in the cost of living and people no longer being able to afford to have small animals as pets.

Currently advertising was done through word of mouth to groups.

8 NVS REPORT: CAMDEN

8.1 Mice

There was one study that involved mice undergoing radiation at another establishment and then being transported to the RVC. The mice have shown mild signs of skin irritation and dermatitis following irradiation, which had not been identified as a side effect in the PPL. The mice have received treatment with topical antibiotics and the researchers were reviewing their radiation system procedure to make sure there was nothing amiss. Keep animal alive requests have been approved by the Home Office but an amendment will need to be submitted if this continues to be an issue.

8.2 Guinea pigs

The guinea pigs that were bought in from the rehoming centres were now being housed with the original guinea pigs and they all seemed to have settled well together. One interesting development is that seeing the new guinea pigs eating greens, has encouraged the original guinea pigs to do so as well.

9 NVS REPORT – HAWKSHEAD

9.1 Sheep recovery orthopaedic studies

A protocol had been added to a project licence to develop anterior cruciate ligament repair models for ACL reconstruction. The first surgery on a sheep had taken place with the sheep then closely monitored. It had responded well to analgesia and seemed to be recovering well and was eating, but had then deteriorated and had to be euthanised. The problem seemed to be with the reconstruction not holding. The suture techniques have been reviewed. The surgeon has reviewed and changed the suture techniques and another surgery with a sheep was planned.

10 END OF PPL REVIEW

An end of PPL report had been reviewed but because it was poorly written and incomplete, it would be returned to the project licence holder to redo. The PPL Holder would not be permitted to carry out further work until this report had been completed properly.

11 CONDITION 18 REPORTS

AWERB noted that two condition 18 reports had been submitted involving the same project licence. A query was raised about what had happened to the pups whose mum had then been found dead. It was explained that usually in these types of circumstances the technicians would initially try and find a foster mum, but if that was not possible, then they would have to be culled.

12 ITEMS TO NOTE

The following items were noted:

- Amendment to establishment licence
- New project licences granted by the home office
- Project licences amended by the home office
- Study requests approved since 2 April 2025
- Internal tissue requests approved since 2 April 2025

13 DATES OF NEXT MEETING

- 16 July: PPL Review: 10am to 12pm

Secretary
24 July 2025