

Letter

Response to the Comment published in *ATLA*, on the Declaration on Openness on Animal Research

Dear Editor,

In his Comment piece on the Declaration on Openness on Animal Research (*ATLA* 40, 339–341), Professor Michael Balls asks “Is this a genuine commitment to honest and open dialogue, or just another propaganda exercise?” The short answers are yes, it is a genuine commitment and no, there is no wish to create any sort of propaganda.

Over fifty organisations involved in biomedical research in the UK have come together to develop a Concordat on how they can all work to be more open and honest about their use of animals in scientific, medical and veterinary research. We, the Steering Group for this process, have met to agree an outline draft Concordat, which is now with a Working Group that will consult with all the signatories to the Declaration to create a more-detailed draft. We will then hold a public consultation on the proposed Concordat, before publishing the final document in the autumn.

We are also running a public dialogue process which will inform the final wording of the Concordat. After all, there is little point in setting out the practical steps that the UK research establishment, and those that fund animal research, can take to help the public understand why and how animal research is carried out, if what we say does not actually resonate with the public.

A further aspect of the Concordat development process will be discussions with animal welfare groups and organisations that seek to reduce and limit, or even abolish, animal research — we want to know what openness on animal research means to them, and will strive to respect their views where possible.

Openness about animal research will necessarily include an element of working with media organisations. Therefore, we are also planning a workshop with key UK print, broadcast and online media, in order to explore what they would ideally like to see in a Concordat on Openness on Animal Research.

Professor Balls also asks why the declaration to develop this Concordat was made in the first place. He rightly points to the results of an Ipsos MORI survey of UK public opinion on animal research. This showed a slight drop in acceptance levels for animal research among the British public, but overall acceptance levels remained high. More importantly, 40% of the respondents to this survey said that they wanted more information about animal research before making up their minds. It is this desire for more information that the Concordat seeks to address.

As animal rights extremism has dropped away in this country, more and more institutions and individuals are feeling able to talk more openly about their use of animals in scientific research. There is still opposition to animal research, but, nevertheless, media organisations are being invited into research establishments to convey the reality of what happens. Media coverage of medical breakthroughs regularly includes reference to the animal research involved.

We hope that everyone with an interest in animal research, whether they support it or not, will provide input to the development of the Concordat. We believe that by working together we can engender a more open dialogue about the realities, successes and limitations of animal research, as well as all the efforts that are being made to refine, reduce and replace the use of animals. Surely we all want the public to have the chance to make an informed decision about how they feel about this important issue?

Yours sincerely,

The Steering Group — Concordat on Openness on Animal Research:

Wendy Jarrett (Group Secretariat)
Chief Executive
Understanding Animal Research
Hodgkin Huxley House
30 Farringdon Lane

London EC1R 3AW
UK
E-mail: WJarrett@uar.org.uk

Dr Geoff Watts (Chair)
Dr Claire Allan (GlaxoSmithKline)
Professor Margot Brazier (Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, University of Manchester)
Paul Clark (Universities UK)
Adrian Deeny (University College London)
Nancy Lee (The Wellcome Trust)
Dr Lawrence Moon (Wolfson Centre for Age-Related Diseases, King's College London)
Dr Vicky Robinson (National Centre for the 3Rs)
David Taylor (Patient representative)
Professor Dominic Wells (Royal Veterinary College)
Lord Phil Willis (Chair, Association of Medical Research Charities)