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OLAW Webinar Promotes AAALAC, Describes 'Value of Accreditation'

By Theresa Defino

Although accreditation is voluntary and not required to conduct Public Health Service (PHS)-funded research using animals or to obtain federal funding, the HHS Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW) devoted its most recent webinar to essentially making a pitch for accreditation by the American Association for Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC).

The description of the Sept. 9 webinar, "What Every IACUC Should Know About AAALAC International," stated that the purpose was to address an NIH notice issued this summer that suggested one way to reduce administrative burden was to repurpose some accreditation material into OLAW's assurance documents.^[1] OLAW and other agencies have been looking for strategies to reduce burden, as required by the 2016 Cures Act.

More specifically, the June 4 notice, NOT-OD-21-130, explains the option that assured institutions have to use sections of AAALAC's program description "to complete parts" of an institution's assurance submitted to OLAW.^[2]

The webinar featured Jane Na, director of OLAW's Division of Assurances, and Helen Diggs, AAALAC senior director. A portion of Diggs' presentation was devoted to "myths vs. facts" about AAALAC and the "value of accreditation."

AAALAC: To Feds, Accreditation Adds 'Credibility'

For example, it is a "myth" that AAALAC "imposes biomedical standards" on agricultural animal research programs, said Diggs. Another slide addressed "perceptions vs. reality." The perceptions listed are that AAALAC overinterprets standards, imposes new standards, and that its suggestions for improvement "must be followed."

According to Diggs' slides, the reality is that "state-of-the-art practices evolve"; "mandatory items are based on existing standards"; "suggestions for improvement are just that"; and "perceived inconsistencies are continuously reviewed by [the] AAALAC Council."

Under the value of accreditation, Diggs' slides listed that it:

- "Improves opportunities for inter- and intra-institutional collaborations that may result in sponsored research funding and enhanced networking,
- "Leverages institutional support for facility upgrades and continuing improvements," and
- "Adds credibility to the institution's program among federal agencies" such as NIH, the National Science Foundation and the Department of Defense, as well as the National Institute of Food and Agriculture or Agricultural Research Service.

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