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### 'Humane Endpoints' a Useful Metric In Assessing Health of Research Animals

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By Theresa Defino

In the most recent webinar on management of research animals sponsored by the NIH Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW), Debra Hickman, director of the Laboratory Animal Resources Center at Indiana University (IU), discussed the concept of “humane endpoints.” These can be added to animal protocols to alleviate, as she put it, “any potential suffering that happens in that window between morbidity and mortality.”

In introducing Hickman, Susan Silk, OLAW director of policy, noted that Hickman “directs an active laboratory that explores how the bi methodology, handling, and housing selections that are used in research affect the well-being of animals used in research.” This is in addition to her clinical and administrative duties.

Hickman said it might be “fair” to consider replacing “endpoints” with humane endpoints in protocol applications.

Such a change might clarify “what it is that we’re asking” and differentiate for scientists who think “an end point is [only] the end of the study” occurring, for example, when data collection is complete or at 90 days when the animal is planned to be euthanized, she said.

Under the concept of humane endpoints, “What you’re asking is...when are we going to euthanize before your actual endpoints? So your protocol form needs to ask for the timeline of the study, which will get to the study endpoint in an experimental design, but you do need to ask [scientists] about their humane endpoints,” Hickman said during the Sept. 20 webinar.

When a humane endpoint is reached in an animal study, it marks the “time to remove the animal from the study,” Hickman explained.

Humane endpoints should be “clearly defined before any animal work starts,” she said.

“The last thing that we want is a situation where an animal is in distress or needs attention, and we’re not clear on what the path is,” triggering arguments between the scientist, the institutional animal care and use committee (IACUC) and veterinarian “over whether this animal has reached the agreed humane endpoints or not,” Hickman said. “That potentially can result in significant pain or distress for the animal. And so having all this in place before the study even starts is the best practice for making sure that we’re doing the best by the animals.”

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