

Terms of Reference

FELASA Working Group on Welfare and health management of laboratory dogs, cats and ferrets

Background

Exposure of carnivorans from a young age to complex environments and socialisation is key to the animal's ability to handle future colony life events or rehoming. Dogs, cats and ferrets favour housing conditions enriched by elevated platforms, provision of comfortable rest areas, frequent renewal of toys, and close intra and inter-species contact. The welfare of carnivorans is improved by an access to an outdoor area or by dedicating staff working hours to play with the laboratory animals. However, contact with biosecurity threats from outside their indoor housing or with staff owning pets may compromise their health status. The management of the colony therefore consists in keeping three parameters in balance: environmental enrichment, health and welfare monitoring, and preventive and curative veterinary treatments. Indeed, dogs, cats and ferrets are prone to contaminations that can be prevented by strict biosecurity measures, mitigated by vaccination, or managed by metaphylaxis.

The aim of this working group is to review existing recommendations for the husbandry and care of dogs, cats and ferrets in order to synthesize recommendations adapted to the laboratory conditions in compliance with the European directive 2010/63/EU and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of some routine care in the context of biomedical research. The working group will focus on non-procedural welfare, i.e. routine husbandry, and will not address welfare impairments directly induced by transport or experiments. Training specific to experimental procedures will not be addressed either.

Tasks, proposed line of work

The working group will:

- Review existing scientific literature, recommendations and past FELASA publications on the welfare and health management of dogs, cats and ferrets' colonies
- Review biosecurity risks and their mitigation process

- Review the importance of control and predictability (from the point of view of the animal) to reduce stress in relation to the husbandry conditions and human-animal interaction of dogs, cats and ferrets
- Recommend materials and methods to optimize housing, husbandry, socialisation and environmental enrichment for the three species
- Recommend appropriate ways for staff to interact with the animals, including training to optimize human-animal interaction and care
- Recommend techniques and strategies to monitor and evaluate welfare of laboratory dogs, cats and ferrets
- Propose new practical recommendations for the health monitoring of each species
- Discuss harm/benefit analysis of some veterinary care or welfare optimization practice considering their potential impact on biomedical research

Composition of the working group

The members of the working group will be nominated by the FELASA member associations according to their experience with colony management of dogs, cats and ferrets. Scientists specialized in dogs, cats and ferrets' welfare and laboratory veterinarians with documented experience should be considered for this working group.

Budget

A total of 4000 Euro for telephone conferences and 1-2 face to face meetings. Another 3000 Euro are available for Open Access publication.

Deadline

Two years after start.