

Care-full stories: Story 4: Not just the two of us

November 2022



Instructions

Aim:

To explore the conflicting pressures that exist for early career researchers as well as institutional differences that have an impact on their work.

Setting:

Waiting before the Animal Welfare Ethical Review Body (AWERB) for their institution.

Characters:

- **Two early career researchers (A and B)** both in the process of getting project licence approval. One has just come out of the AWERB while the other is about to go in.

Set up:

In person:

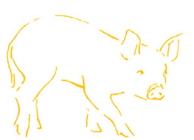
Two chairs set next to each other. Two people take position in this row (standing, sitting or whatever is comfortable).

Zoom:

In a zoom waiting room for the AWERB.



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Script

Researcher A: Hi! Have you just come out of the AWERB?

Researcher B: Yes. I didn't mean to go back into the waiting area! If you're next they'll probably be ready for you soon.

A: Great... great...

B: Are you alright? You look a bit on edge.

A: Yeah, it's just my first time in front of it. I'm a Principal Investigator (PI) for the first time, for a project on cancer, so lots of in vivo models, lots of animals. It's taken over a year to get here. Right before that I was in Sweden, so I'm still getting used to the processes here. And there's a lot to get used to! What about you?

B: Epilepsy project. I've been through this a couple of times though.

A: It just feels like waiting outside the headmaster's office at school! Sorry, I don't mean to keep you but -

B: I'm in no rush.

A: Could tell me who is in there?

B: Oh... actually, I can't... I didn't know them and they didn't introduce themselves. But I did recognise someone from one of the other labs and a vet, I think. Are you sure you are all right?

A: Yes, yes, sorry. It's just that if I don't get the project approved today I'm not sure how I'll get the work done and get publications out before my contract expires. And that won't look great on the old CV.

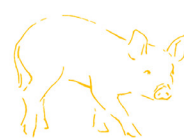
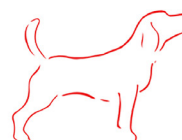
B: I know the feeling. But you've got this far; you'll be fine.

A: It's just been a tough year. It was hard to get going when I arrived, I wasn't sure where to find the right information on all the websites I was given, and it was quite a transition from working in a lab where everything was set up, and then suddenly it was all on me and I realised how much I had to do and think about. I've just been feeling really... exposed...

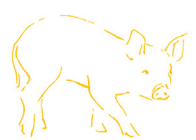
B: I remember that feeling too, that you don't have the experience and will make mistakes. But you will get there! I've been lucky to mostly work in really supportive environments, which I know isn't the case everywhere.



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- A:** I guess I wish there was a bit more support. I don't really feel I can approach some of the more senior staff for help. I don't know them very well and, after all, I'm supposed to be the PI... also, there's been a lot of staff changes over the last year. We do have a liaison person to help us now though. I just wish they'd been here a year ago. One thing I can count on is the Animal Techs – they are super-skilled and great to work with.
- B:** People being approachable is half the battle. In my group we have a really close relationship with the tech staff. I actually worry that this will change now because they are reorganising and centralising things, moving Animal Techs around and mixing things up...
- A:** Yeah. [Pause] So, do you mind if I ask you what kind of questions they might ask me in there?
- B:** Not at all! It can be quite a mix. They might ask you, for example, to justify your humane end points, or to revise a substance administration route to make it more refined. The layperson – I think – even asked me why I couldn't just use fruit flies!
- A:** I feel like I've spent so long trying to get everything right, reconciling everyone's opinions, getting the wording right, getting everything in there. It barely leaves time for actual research... and then there's more writing after that, getting publications out and all that. It just feels like we're expected to do more and more work, publish more and more papers, across a wider range of fields, and with shorter and shorter deadlines.
- B:** Slow down! You have to try to not think of it all at once! But I hear you. Publications are a constant pressure. Last year I got asked to do a really unfeasible additional study by a reviewer for an international publication. It was just impossible. And I felt it really wasn't needed for the paper.
- A:** That puts you in an awful position. And also, isn't that a really unnecessary use of more animals?
- B:** That's something else they'll ask you about in there, how you've applied the 3Rs and made sure you've used the optimum number of animals. And they're really keen on the whole 'culture of care'.
- A:** Well, I should be all right on that point. The university makes us jump through enough hoops to prove we are committed to good animal welfare. Which, of course, is very important.
- B:** Sure. But I think I have to agree with my past supervisors; it's a bit much, I just want to do my work; the admin and paperwork is excessive and can get in the way. In some cases, it takes so long to get approved to do an experiment that the funding is nearly over before you begin.



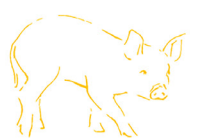
- A:** Yeah, and then the funding bodies ask you questions and want information...
- B:** Speaking of which, I should probably go. I'm working on a funding application at the moment. I'm on a fixed term contract, so always looking for that next thing! Anyway, how are you feeling now? Ready?
- A:** Yeah, I feel better, thank you. I think I'll be fine. It's all just made me think a bit, you know, talking about caring for the animals, welfare and all the work around that, while we are under all the other additional pressures – publishing, funding, learning new stuff in new places, building the CV to secure something permanent - it feels like so much. And like you're all alone doing it. I'm left wondering, who's taking care of me? Is it all worth it?
- B:** When you find your feet, it will be, if you love it.
- A:** Luckily I do. Oh, I think they're calling me in...
- B:** Good luck!

Both exit / turn off screen.

****End of script****



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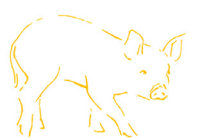


Discussion prompts:

1. What are your experiences of differences in working methods institutionally? Nationally? Internationally? What do these differences mean for your work?
2. What pressures on early career researchers are identified in the script? Do these resonate with your own experience? If yes, how so? If not, how does your experience differ?
3. Do you have any similar examples experiences that you would like to share?



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Acknowledgements

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