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# P.I. E-NEWS

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### Animal Welfare:

## Lab Rat O.K. as Pet?

**Reader Question:** My lab has 200 rats involved in a long-term study. The technicians have become very attached to one in particular, and have turned “him” into something of a pet. He has been given a name, and his cage is kept right in our lab, not in the animal room. He frequently gets stroked and petted, plus he is even put into a tiny “leash” and taken for walks around the lab. Is their friendliness to a lab animal to be praised, or should I insist it be discontinued and staff maintain their emotional distance? Are any animal welfare regulations being violated?

**Expert Comments:** From the federal [United States Government] oversight perspective, the PHS [Public Health Service] Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*, and the Animal Welfare Act Regulations are silent on this specific point. The decision would rest with the institution and its Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC).

Important points the IACUC should consider in making its decision include:

- the introduction of variables into the study if the rat is on an active protocol;
- the potential threat to the rest of the research rat colony if this animal is not kept at the same health status as its cohorts;
- the responsibility of daily care and feeding of the animal and regular sanitation (including weekends, holidays, and vacations) when research staff may not be present;
- provisions to prevent exposure to rodent allergens for those individuals in the lab who are allergic;

- consideration of appropriate environmental conditions including light cycle, temperature and humidity;
- identification of the animal's location to security and emergency personnel.

In the situation described in your question, if the rat in question is not actively involved in a study, colony health status is not impacted, daily care and appropriate housing is guaranteed, exposure to allergens is mitigated, the veterinarian and IACUC approve of the pet status, emergency procedures for the animal's safety have been developed, and there is no institutional policy prohibiting pets on campus, then this arrangement may be possible.

Note: The Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare published a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) on a related topic: adopting out research animals at the conclusion of the research or when they are no longer on study. This FAQ may be found at <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/olaw/faqs.htm#f11>. It is quoted below:

**Can IACUCs authorize the adoption of research animals as pets after the animals are no longer needed for study?**

*The PHS Policy, the Guide and the Animal Welfare Act are silent on the issue of private adoption of research animals for pets after a study has been completed and the animals are no longer required. The 9 CFR recordkeeping regulations and official policies offer institutions the option of developing and implementing an adoption policy. OLAW is supportive of the concept of adoption but reminds institutions that NIH grant funds may not be used to support the cost of the program. The PHS will not assume legal or financial responsibility for any adoption program or any results of adoption. The institution should ensure that its policy meets pertinent state and local regulations for transfer of animal ownership and is encouraged to coordinate with local animal shelters.*

Comments by Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, Office of Extramural Research, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health

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