

ABSA
INTERNATIONAL
OCTOBER 2018
Biosafety Month

Promoting a Culture of Biosafety and Responsibility

Promoting public transparency regarding institutional biosafety oversight is a hallmark in having a robust biosafety culture. Although she might consider herself an outsider, Dr. Brynn Welch, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has close ties to the Biosafety Community. Dr. Welch discusses why transparency in research safety is important and how best to address public concerns with the inherent risks present in biological research. Use this article to advocate for transparency and ethical practices with your scientific personnel.

We live in an informationally fragmented society, in which even the most skeptical person is compelled, by social design, to trust complex systems made up of countless others – strangers, no less – just to get through the day. If we want to live in a society with automobiles on roads, we have to trust the systems that produce those cars and roads. If the public wants a robust research agenda, they have to trust labs and the strangers who work in them. But in the case of lab research, that's a big "if." Of course, if we conducted a poll, we'd find that people are overwhelmingly in favor of a world without smallpox or Ebola. But loss aversion is real, and a bad day in the lab is a blockbuster script writing itself, so it's not surprising if people are less than eager to subject themselves to risk – no matter how small – in pursuit of that world. On one hand, it is frustrating for experts to be constrained by the concerns of non-experts. On the other hand, lack of expertise doesn't make those concerns any less real. We can tell the public how big a risk is, but we don't get to tell them how significant that risk is to them. The tiny odds of a really bad outcome make that outcome less likely; they don't make it any less scary.



Dr. Brynn Welch

But, if you can't overcome loss aversion, and you can't tell people not to be afraid of some virtually impossible outcome, what then? It is not enough for you to know that you deserve their trust; the public deserves to know that, too. Show them how you work. Show them why you work. Show them the layers upon layers of systems, the checks and balances in place to protect them from malice, carelessness, or even an unpredictable act of God. Show the steps you've taken to ensure that if someone working within the lab notices that something is wrong, they have every incentive to report it and no incentive not to. After all, we trust people to be self-serving long before we trust them to be morally upstanding. In short, show them the steps you take to prevent the thing they're afraid of from happening, and then show them the steps you'll take to protect them if it does. The fact that social design compels the public to trust you if they want a robust research agenda does not make them any less entitled to systems and people worthy of that trust. Especially because – again – that's a big "if."

Dr. Brynn Welch
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
University of Alabama at Birmingham

ABSA International is pleased to be a part of 2018 Biosafety Month, "Promoting a Culture of Biosafety and Responsibility" and encourages all biosafety professionals to "Get Your Culture On!" #getyourcultureon.

For more information on 2018 Biosafety Month and access to additional resources visit:
<https://absa.org/event/2018-biosafety-month/>



ABSA
INTERNATIONAL
The Association for Biosafety and Biosecurity