

## The bridge between labs, animal facilities, and the state

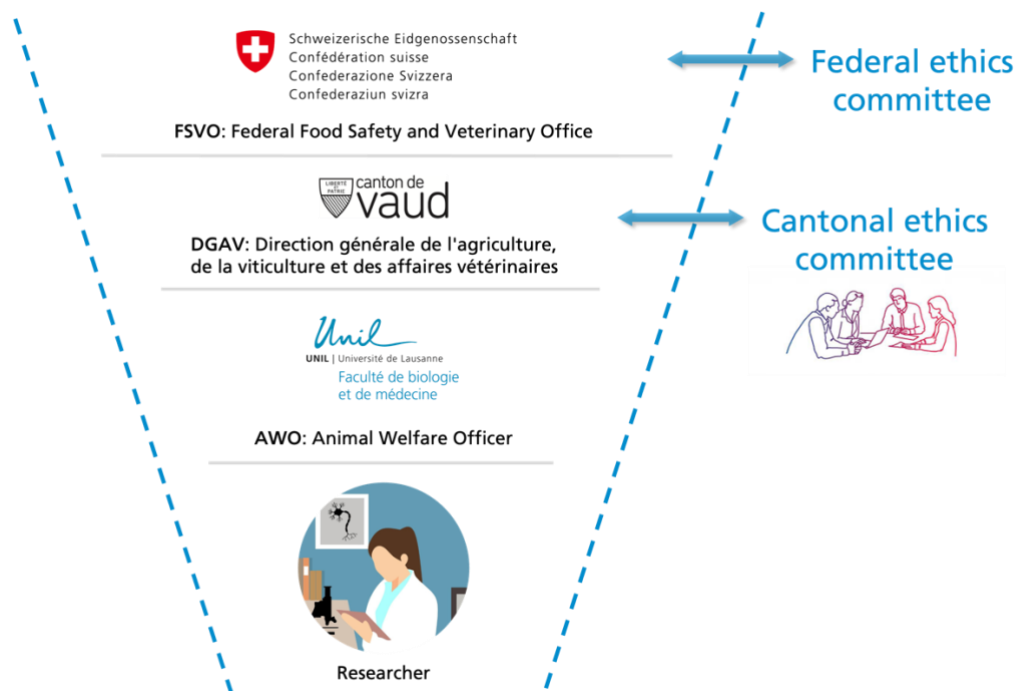
**Jessica Lavier and Valentina Mercaldo are the FBM's Animal Welfare Officers. In this crucial role, they act as a bridge between scientists, legal authorities, and animal facility teams.**

It's a discreet office on the Biopôle campus at Épalanges, where you find Jessica Lavier and Valentina Mercaldo – at least in theory. The FBM's Animal Welfare Officers (AWOs) share their base with the other members of the animal experimentation team, but their daily work extends far beyond that. From animal facilities to research laboratories, and even meetings across Switzerland, their mission takes them to many different places. A joint interview.

**To begin with, could you explain what the role of an Animal Welfare Officer entails?**

**Jessica Lavier (JL) :** According to [Swiss legislation](#), Animal Welfare Officers oversee two key aspects of animal experimentation authorization requests: they must be comprehensive, and each experiment must be justified in accordance with legal and ethical requirements. Every institution conducting animal experiments is required to appoint such an officer.

In practice, this means we serve as the bridge between researchers, animal facilities, and legal authorities, such as the *Direction générale de l'agriculture, de la viticulture et des affaires vétérinaires* ([DGAV](#)). Previously known as the «*Service de la consommation et des affaires vétérinaires*» (SCAV), the DGAV is the cantonal authority that represents the **first regulatory instance** for animal experimentation in the canton of Vaud (see scheme below).



**The different regulatory bodies for animal experimentation in Switzerland.** Each animal experiment and any holding of laboratory animals [requires authorization](#). In their authorization requests, researchers must explain why the experiment is necessary, the expected benefits, the constraints on the animals, and the conditions of their confinement. Animal Welfare Officers (AWOs) assist in preparing the application and ensure its completeness and ethical and legal compliance. The Cantonal Ethics Committee for Animal Experiments reviews the application, clarifies questions with the researchers and the AWOs, and issues a recommendation: refusal, acceptance with conditions (e.g., use of fewer animals), or acceptance. The authorization is granted by the cantonal veterinary office (DGAV in the canton of Vaud). The Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO) oversees the cantonal decision and may request corrections. For complex or controversial issues, veterinary authorities may seek the opinion of the Federal Ethics Committee for Animal Experiments. The validity of an authorization is limited to a maximum of three years.

**Valentina Mercaldo (VM)** : In practical terms, our role is to ensure that authorization requests comply with ethical and legal frameworks. We support scientists from the early stages of protocol design, guiding them towards best practices based on the [3Rs principle](#), and we then monitor the implementation of approved procedures. From an ethical perspective, we make sure that each experiment is truly necessary, in accordance with the [harm-benefit analysis](#)\* required by Swiss law.

We are therefore in constant contact with researchers, but also with the animal facility teams, who play a crucial role. With approximately 250 authorized project licenses at the FBM, they are our eyes on the ground and help us maintain an overview of ongoing experiments. We also interact daily with the DGAV, whether for inspections or for discussions on experimental procedures.

***Do you spend more time in the office or in the animal facilities?***

**VM** : That depends a lot on our current tasks, but we do spend quite a bit of time in the animal facilities. Then there's reading protocols, familiarizing ourselves with regulations and guidelines — all of that happens in front of the computer. Finally, we frequently travel to meet researchers at various sites of the FBM and attend meetings with colleagues and partners across Switzerland, for example with EPFL or with Animal Welfare Officers from other universities.

**JL** : We also collaborate closely with the FBM's infrastructure team and the animal facility management on logistical matters. For example, we ensure animal welfare during transfers between institutions or check on the availability of specific equipment needed for certain experiments.

***You share this role between two people, which is quite unique. How does that work?***

**VM** : It's actually mostly reassuring. Being able to exchange ideas, get a second opinion, and share the workload is really valuable. However, it requires excellent teamwork because we also share the responsibility and need to agree on decisions.

**JL** : I completely agree, and it works very well. Though logistically, it's not always easy, since we both have other professional activities in parallel. My work is split between the animal experimentation team and the School of Biology, while Valentina continued her neuroscience research until recently.

***You both have a scientific background. Do you consider this important for your current role?***

**JL** : Absolutely, it's actually even a legal requirement. To become an Animal Welfare Officer, you need to complete the [qualifying training](#) (Modules 1 and 2). As a prerequisite, you must have an academic degree in the field and three years of experience in animal experimentation.

**VM** : On top of the legal requirements, knowing how research works from the inside allows us to dive into the details of experimental protocols and engage in discussions on equal footing with researchers. A deep understanding of the scientific process—from designing experiments to the statistical requirements for obtaining reliable results—is crucial.

**Final question: What do you enjoy most about your work?**

**VM :** I'd say my favorite part is definitely interacting with researchers and discussing concrete experiments.

**JL :** What I enjoy most is the variety of tasks in this role. And we're currently in quite an exciting time for Animal Welfare Officers in Switzerland. There are many ongoing legislative revisions, and we participate in an advisory capacity in discussions at both the cantonal and federal levels. These exchanges are always enriching and give us the opportunity to contribute our field expertise. One thing is certain: in this constantly evolving field, there's never a dull moment!

*\* **Harm-benefit analysis** is a central concept of Swiss animal experimentation regulation. Before an experiment is approved, the law requires researchers to evaluate whether the expected benefits for society justify the constraints imposed on the animals. This assessment compares, on one hand, the importance of the knowledge the experiment could generate (for example, in treating a disease) and, on the other hand, the level of suffering or stress the animals would experience. An experiment can only be authorized if the benefits clearly outweigh the constraints and if no alternative methods exist to obtain the same knowledge. This approach reflects Switzerland's ethical stance, which recognizes the value of animals while permitting research necessary for medical and scientific progress.*

**To learn more :**

- The role of Animal Welfare Officers according to the *Ordonnance sur la protection des animaux (OPAn)*, [Art. 129 «Désignation des personnes responsables»](#)
- The [harm-benefit analysis](#) as regulated in the *Ordonnance sur l'expérimentation animale*, [Art. 30 «Contenu de la demande d'autorisation de pratiquer des expériences sur des animaux»](#)
- The procedure for [application and authorisation](#) of animal experiments in Switzerland
- [Qualifying education \(Modules 1 and 2\)](#) provided by the Lemanic Animal Facility Network (ResAL)

Freezing embryos to reduce the number of animals in research? This is what the FBM's Mouse Embryology Platform proposes. To be explored in the next article in March 2025.