

December 9, 2020

Dr. G. Michael Purdy
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Dear Dr. Purdy,

On behalf of Rise for Animals (Rise; formerly the New England Anti-Vivisection Society), and our membership in New York, I am writing to relay our concern regarding troubling evidence of animal suffering at Columbia University Medical Center. We respectfully request that you count, disclose, and reduce the number of mice used in your facilities and commit to increasing funding for the development of non-animal research methods.

Document We Reviewed

In formulating the recommendation below, Rise reviewed 8 Reports of Noncompliance sent to NIH-OLAW from 2017–2019, which Rise obtained through multiple Freedom of Information Act requests.

Finding: Pattern of Abuse and Neglect of Mice at Columbia University Medical Center

The documents we reviewed reveal that there is an alarming pattern of abuse of mice at your facility.

In 2017,

- Five mice died of dehydration because the lab staff didn't look closely enough to make sure water could be accessed by all 40 cages of mice, after switching to an automatic water system that the mice weren't used to.¹
- There were 4 cages of mice found during an investigation that had no food, water, or bedding.² They were used in an expired protocol, meaning that the experiment was unapproved and shouldn't have been happening.

¹ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 1V] (Nov. 27, 2017).

² Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 1W] (Dec. 28, 2017).

In 2018,

- It was discovered that Columbia University Medical Center was using an unapproved method of euthanasia—freezing mice to death.³ This was not part of the approved protocol and is in direct violation of euthanasia standards set out by the American Veterinary Medical Association.
- An anonymous whistleblower reported to the Executive Director of the IACUC that 20–25 cages of mice had insufficient, moldy food or water, stating that there were dead mice.⁴ It is still unknown how many mice died. The cages were also in an unapproved location.
- Forty adult mice and 137 baby mice died of dehydration after their water source became disconnected.⁵ Nobody in the lab noticed for days, and apparently didn't think it was worth checking.

In 2019,

- A mouse was used in an unnecessary experiment, and the experimenter failed in almost every way possible to provide appropriate care.⁶ There was no heating pad used during surgery, no records of the surgeries or pain medicine used, the lab equipment was not sterile, and the surgery performed was different than what was described in the protocol.
- Seven mice died in another unapproved fecal-related experiment.⁷ Thirty mice were affected, but the fecal transplant procedure—that wasn't supposed to be happening—killed 7 individuals.
- A mouse drowned to death on accident during a swim test because the water was too cold.⁸ The experimenter “left the carcass in the pool and departed.”

Request: Count, Disclose, and Reduce the Number of Animals Used at Your Facilities

This blatant disregard for animal welfare was not done in compliance with existing animal welfare laws and regulations, and should not have occurred under your leadership at Columbia University Medical Center. Having no access to food, water, and bedding is life-threatening for mice, and hundreds of mice have died due to lack of access to food and water under your leadership. Ignoring protocols, not following proper surgical standards, and using unapproved methods of euthanasia are also unacceptable. This behavior should not be tolerated.

Given these concerns related to animal suffering, I respectfully request that you consider committing to a full and transparent self-assessment of your animal research program that is complete with a commitment to reduce animal suffering at Columbia University over time. As such,

³ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 1X] (Feb. 12, 2018).

⁴ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 1Y] (July 25, 2018).

⁵ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 2B] (Nov. 20, 2018).

⁶ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 2C] (Feb. 13, 2019).

⁷ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 2E] (April 9, 2019).

⁸ Report of Noncompliance [OLAW Case 2H] (July 31, 2019).

please consider fully counting the total number of animals of all species that Columbia University researchers use annually and disclosing this number to the public. This inventory should be of your full animal holdings, including species of animals not covered by the Animal Welfare Act, such as mice, rats, birds, and fish. Disclosing this number annually to the general public will allow the public (including taxpayers, whose funds support these areas of research through federal grants) to witness any progress Columbia University is making with respect to the goal of reducing the number of animals that suffer in labs over time.

As part of this effort please consider developing a reduction schedule that Columbia can reasonably commit to that offers a clear roadmap for the eventual phaseout of animal experiments. Unless you establish a goal for yourself institutionally, you cannot expect to make progress. And until you commit to conducting the underlying inventory, you run the risk of being unaware yourself of the total number of animal lives being lost every year.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Herschler', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Nathan Herschler
Executive Director