

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 16, Number 2. February 28, 2019

### OLAW's Silk Looks Back on Career, Ponders Future of Animal Research

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By Theresa Defino

The very last day of 2018 was also the final time Susan Silk, 65, sat behind her desk in the NIH Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, where for 12 years she served as OLAW's first director of the Division of Policy and Education (DPE).

Silk's retirement capped a somewhat intermittent 35-year NIH career that saw her at various offices, including the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The timing is right "to start a new chapter," she said. Stepping away from OLAW will give Silk, an artist, time to "teach drawing and study painting" and "have more adventures and make some new friends."

Many in the research compliance community know Silk from her work as OLAW's liaison to the Federal Demonstration Partnership (she was the one with the knitting needles—more about this later) and as the voice of OLAW's educational webinar series, now entering its 11th year. And she'll remain a familiar face to animal researchers and members of institutional animal care and use committees (IACUCs): Silk will be under contract to OLAW to help run the ICARE training program, which stands for Interagency Collaborative Animal Research Education.

The policy and education office was created in 2006 to "write clear understandable policy interpretation so that institutions can understand exactly what OLAW expects," Silk told RRC. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the division's work "includes explaining what we do not require as often as we are called on to explain what is expected," she added.

Neera Gopee, who previously served in OLAW's Division of Compliance Oversight, has been named acting director while HHS hunts for Silk's replacement. "Neera is bright, well-educated and has experience at OLAW. I think she will do a stellar job as acting director," Silk said.

The need for more—and targeted—training from OLAW was a theme that Silk sounded in a wide-ranging discussion with RRC held on Dec. 17. Silk also reviewed her career, including her time at NCI's whimsically named Office of Mice Advice, shared her interests both in and out of NIH, and explained why there will always be a need for animal research.

#### **Tell us a little about your background and what you did before this most recent job.**

As an undergraduate, I was torn between art and biology. At the Maryland Institute College of Technology, art was my principal field of study. After graduation in 1974 with a B.F.A. in design, I had a jewelry store in Frederick; I made the jewelry. But it was rough. I would often eat with my grandparents and had to sleep in the store because I couldn't afford an apartment. I took showers at the Y. I decided to go to grad school and went to the University of Maryland College Park, earning a B.S. in biological illustration in 1982 and a M.S. in genetics in 1987.

I was supporting myself—barely—with biological illustrations, until one fortunate day when professor William J.

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Higgins introduced me to NCI scientist Michael Potter, M.D. Mike needed a visually acute person to train as a murine cytogeneticist, and he took a chance on me, and that is how, in 1983, I began my NIH career.

As a graduate student in Mike's NCI Laboratory of Genetics, I collaborated with the Karolinska Institute and had the wonderful opportunity to study oncogenes, genetics and murine cytogenetics while living in Bethesda, Maryland, and Stockholm. After graduation, I managed the first NIH mouse barrier facility to provide transgenic and knockout mice to the NIH intramural and grantee community. I went on to direct core laboratories at both NIH and the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine where my groups made genetically altered mice for researchers.

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