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PETA Publicizes Reports to OLAW, USDA Inspections, Targets NIH Intramural Program

By Theresa Defino

Nina F. Schor, M.D., had been in her job as acting deputy director of NIH's intramural research program (IRP) for 15 days when she received an email from Alka Chandna, congratulating her and noting "this new position brings with it an extensive set of responsibilities." But Chandna had more on her mind than wishing Schor well.

"While you serve in this role, I hope you'll take the opportunity to address ongoing systemic and egregious violations of animal welfare guidelines in NIH's intramural laboratories," Chandna, vice president for laboratory investigations cases for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), wrote in the Aug. 15 email.^[1] She included more than a dozen case reports of incidents at IRP labs that Chandna told RRC PETA obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

NIH has not been the only recipient of recent correspondence from PETA. On Aug. 10, Jeffrey R. Balser, M.D., president and CEO of Vanderbilt University Medical Center, received a letter from Andréa Kuchy, a PETA research associate.^[2] Kuchy asked that Balser "take personal responsibility for addressing the chronic and egregious animal welfare violations that characterize the treatment of vulnerable animals" that Vanderbilt and its medical center are studying. Vanderbilt did not respond to repeated requests for comment from RRC.

On Aug. 17, PETA announced on its website that it had "filed a complaint with NIH, calling on it to turn off the money spigot" to Duke University.^[3] According to a July 22 inspection report by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials, three pigs were not observed during a weekend—they had water but no food—and two of four puppies "may have" died after a "researcher did not follow the university-wide communication policy when attempting to contact" the on-call veterinarian. The report states that "both items were corrected prior to inspection."

A day later, PETA issued a statement regarding the death of three bank voles, a type of rodent, that were left without food or water for several days at Dartmouth University.^[4] The worker responsible was fired and retraining was conducted, according to the USDA report, which PETA also posted online.

The flurry of recent activity is part of PETA's strategy to hold NIH and funded institutions' feet to the fire when there are documented violations of either NIH guidelines for animals used in research or of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), which a USDA division enforces.

Depending on the type of animals used in research, institutions (and NIH's own investigators) follow the Public Health Service (PHS) Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, a set of standards the NIH Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW) enforces.^[5]

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