



June 9, 2022

Ray L. Watts, M.D.
President
University of Alabama–Birmingham
1720 Second Ave. S.
Birmingham, AL 35294

Via e-mail: president@uab.edu

Dear President Watts:

I'm writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals U.S.—PETA entities have more than 9 million members and supporters globally—to request that you take personal responsibility for addressing the chronic and egregious animal welfare violations that characterize the treatment of vulnerable animals in the University of Alabama–Birmingham's (UAB) laboratories.

An Insider Alleges Mistreatment of Baboons in UAB's Xenotransplantation Laboratory

This letter follows my correspondence dated August 31, 2020 (attached here for your reference), in which I shared disturbing reports from a UAB insider who had provided PETA with credible information—including photos and videos—that experimenters in a UAB laboratory were running afoul of federal animal welfare regulations and guidelines, resulting in pain and misery for the animals imprisoned there. In this laboratory, run by David K.C. Cooper, organs from genetically modified pigs were being transplanted into baboons. Among other allegations, the whistleblower informed PETA that experimenters in the Cooper laboratory failed to comply with veterinary standards of practice, failed to ensure that medications administered to animals had not expired, and failed to maintain adequate records—even falsifying records, in some cases. He also informed PETA that after a kidney from a genetically modified pig was transplanted into a female baboon named Laja, pockets of fluid collected under her skin along the incision from the transplant surgery. Experimenters reportedly used a syringe to apply Woolite laundry detergent to the transplant incision.

Although your office did not respond to the serious concerns raised in PETA's letter, we have received—through a Freedom of Information Act request—federal reports that corroborate many of the whistleblower's allegations. In particular, one report documents that experimenters in Cooper's laboratory "falsified primate records" and used "inadequate restraint" when subjecting animals to experimental and/or diagnostic procedures. A second report documents that a UAB experimenter failed to maintain adequate records and may have administered expired compounds to nonhuman primates. This report also documents that a laboratory "purchased and used a detergent for cleaning topical areas on animals when a more appropriate clinical use product should have been obtained for this purpose."

PEOPLE FOR
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Additional Violations

The federal reports obtained by PETA document dozens of additional incidents in which UAB experimenters failed to comply with federal animal welfare guidelines from February 2018 to December 2021. Among other serious documented issues, UAB experimenters failed to administer adequate pain relief to more than 400 animals who were used in surgeries or other painful procedures. In one incident, 202 mice who had been subjected to intracranial surgeries were not given the post-operative pain relief required by the experimental protocol. In another incident, a chemical was injected into the anterior chamber of the eyes (the area between the cornea and the iris) of 10 tree shrews, but the animals were not given an analgesic drug as required.

Several experimenters conducted experiments not included in the protocols approved by the university's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), suggesting systemic problems in the school's experimentation program. As you know, IACUCs serve as the last line of defense for animals held in laboratories and used in experiments—and deviations from IACUC-approved protocols are considered gravely problematic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. At UAB, experimenters subjected 40 mice to toe amputations, although this had not been described in the protocol. They also performed invasive ligation surgery on 16 mice without prior approval, and 48 mice were subjected to a procedure that produced paralysis and had not been approved by the IACUC.

In numerous instances, experimenters provided animals with expired medications. For example, in February 2020, an expired anesthetic drug was given to 35 mice who had undergone a surgical procedure. In April 2021, an expired euthanasia solution was used to kill 1,800 mice. Across two separate incidents in December 2021, an expired anesthetic drug was given to a total of 185 mice. Administering expired medications can be less effective or even risky.

Additionally, employees' negligence and failure to monitor animals properly resulted in the deaths of 80 trout when the HVAC system for their tank malfunctioned and no one noticed. In a separate incident, 120 juvenile rainbow trout died after a malfunctioning mechanism in their tank resulted in deteriorating water quality that also went unnoticed.

Conclusion

Such problems will continue unless UAB implements a strong deterrent. The university must inform principal investigators that if they violate federal animal welfare regulations or guidelines, the IACUC will withdraw approval for the protocol and revoke the investigator's animal experimentation privileges and violators will be permanently prohibited from accessing all animal laboratories.

In fiscal year 2021, UAB received more than \$327 million in taxpayer money from the National Institutes of Health. Funding agencies—and the public—expect that institutions will comply with minimal animal welfare regulations and guidelines with the provision of such funding. The university's failures represent an abject violation of the public's trust—and we ask that you immediately address this serious matter by replacing animal experiments with modern, human-relevant research methods.

I am available to discuss this urgent matter with you and can be reached at 757-803-6447 or AlkaC@peta.org. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alka Chandna". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Alka Chandna, Ph.D.

Vice President

Laboratory Investigations Cases