

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 8, 2017

The Honorable Michael J. Missal
Office of the Inspector General
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
801 I Street NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Inspector General Missal,

We write with concerns about apparent misleading statements from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) about harmful dog experiments taking place at a VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (Greater LA VA) laboratory and a related lack of transparency and accountability.

We have closely followed media reports of apparent animal welfare abuses and associated oversight problems at VA research facilities that conduct invasive experiments on dogs.^{1,2} In a statement about this issue made on April 3, 2017, the agency highlighted several ongoing VA research projects involving dogs.³ It read, in part:

“Dog studies currently include... Gaining insights into narcolepsy, a neurological disorder that disables humans, through observational studies of a unique colony of naturally narcoleptic dogs.”

Based on documents released through the Freedom of Information Act that our offices have reviewed, this comment appears to be in reference to studies conducted at the Greater LA VA. We are concerned that the VA’s description of the experiments as “observational” is inaccurate and misleads Congress and taxpayers to believe that the studies are harmless.

According to the research application that was approved in October 2016, this project entails breeding Doberman dogs at the Greater LA VA to suffer from the sleep disorder narcolepsy, injecting them with methamphetamines or antidepressants, and then killing them and removing their brains.⁴ The application classifies these experiments as “Category D,” meaning that they involve pain and distress. Below is an excerpt from the approved application:

¹ Shane III, Leo. (2017, March 21). Animal rights group accuses VA of using dogs in questionable experiments. *Military Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/va-medical-experiments-dogs-wcw>

² Wentling, Nikki. (2017, March 24). Animal rights group calls for investigation of VA research facility. *Stars and Stripes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.stripes.com/animal-rights-group-calls-for-investigation-of-va-research-facility-1.460495>

³ McGuire VA Medical Center. (2017, April 3). VA statement regarding animal testing. Retrieved from: https://www.richmond.va.gov/features/VA_Statement_regarding_animal_testing.asp

⁴ VA Greater Los Angeles Animal Research Protocol (2016, October 24). What causes human narcolepsy? (Protocol no. 08015-16).

“dogs will be given methamphetamine...daily for 6 months or tricyclic antidepressant imipramine...daily for 14 days....The animals will be euthanized at the end of the procedures, perfused transcardially with saline and paraformaldehyde and the brains removed....”

These details are alarming. Such harmful experiments on dogs cannot reasonably be described as “observational.” Even a key animal research oversight guide often cited by the VA^{5,6} defines “observational studies” as those “in which neither the animals nor their environments are disturbed or permanently altered.”⁷

We are also concerned that without access to FOIA documents, we would not have known the VA was providing misleading information or that dogs were even being used in these experiments at the Greater LA VA. The facility’s only narcolepsy-related project listed on the federal research database does not mention dogs or list any study results with more details.⁸

Taxpayers deserve to know how their money is being spent. The humane treatment of dogs, in particular, is an issue of broad concern. In the U.S., 55 million households (44%) have a dog; 67% of voters want more transparency about taxpayer-funded animal experiments; and 75% of voters want experiments on dogs to be phased-out.

Please provide answers to the following questions:

- **“Observational studies”:** Is the Greater LA VA conducting observational narcolepsy studies on dogs that *do not* include administering drugs and killing some or all of them?
- **Narcolepsy experiments on dogs:** How long have narcolepsy studies on dogs at the Greater LA VA been going on and how much has been spent on them?
- **All current dog studies:** Please provide a list of all current research projects involving dogs at the Greater LA VA, their start and end date, funding source and amount, the number of dogs to be used, and pain classification.
- **Total number of dogs being used:** How many dogs were used in FY16? How many dogs are currently held in labs at the Greater LA VA? Please provide a list of names, ages, breeds, and hi-resolution photos.

⁵ Charleston VA Medical Center. (2016, August 11). SOP 19: Institutional animal care and use committee. Retrieved from: https://www.charleston.va.gov/services/research/investigators/for_investigators_qa_sop_19.doc

⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs. (2011, May 2). Institutional animal care and use committee meeting minutes training. Retrieved from: http://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal_research/training/iacuc_minutes.doc

⁷ The IACUC Handbook, third edition. eds. Silverman, Murthy, Suckow. CRC Press, 2013.

⁸ Greater Los Angeles VA Healthcare System. Effects of morphine on the morphology of the hypocretin and mch systems (Project no. 5101BX001753-04). Retrieved from: <https://federalreporter.nih.gov/projects/search?searchId=33fee87fd2184ac3bf0ba00c558e0f88&searchMode=Advanced>

- **Public disclosure:** Is there a public resource that contains accurate and complete information about Greater LA VA's experiments on dogs?

Thank you for your cooperation and attention to this matter.

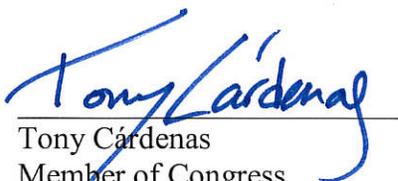
Sincerely,



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



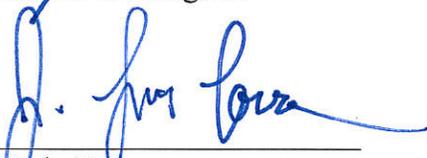
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