

PEOPLE FOR
THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT
OF ANIMALS

January 22, 2021

Joshua A. Gordon, M.D., Ph.D.
Director
National Institute of Mental Health
National Institutes of Health

Via email: joshua.gordon@nih.gov

Dear Dr. Gordon,

Good afternoon. I am writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and its more than 6.5 million members and supporters worldwide to respond to the claims you recently made in your January 11, 2021, [Director's Message](#).

In this message, you suggest that the concerns expressed by PETA regarding Elisabeth Murray's experiments on rhesus macaques is born out of a bias against important mental health research, and an attempt to "take advantage of the unwarranted stigma that is still associated with mental illnesses today." In stark contrast to your claims, our concerns do not stem from any prejudice against mental health research or individuals with mental illness. Rather our concerns are rooted in the paucity of scientific and ethical justifications for this multimillion dollar taxpayer-funded project that causes extensive physical and psychological suffering to primates yet has made no clinically-relevant contributions to human mental health. In case you are unaware of our actual concerns about this project, I have attached our full critique of these experiments for your review.

In your Director's Message, you also state that "Dr. Murray's work has been incredibly important in laying the foundation for efforts to translate neurobiological findings into solutions that will improve the lives of those who live with mental illnesses." However, you do not provide any concrete examples. After reviewing all of Dr. Murray's publications from the past twenty years; among the researchers who do cite them, it seems that few if any are clinical researchers.

Indeed, in your March 10, 2020, direct response to our concerns about Dr. Murray's experiments, rather than address any of our specific questions, you argued that "animal models have played a vital role in

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many scientific and medical advances” and referenced three publications. However, none of these publications actually cite Murray or her experiments, indicating that the NIH, like PETA, could not find evidence that this work is considered particularly valuable for scientific and medical advances. Additionally, as I am sure you know, all the questions Dr. Murray is attempting to answer by studying captive, brain-injured macaques can be answered using non-invasive neuroimaging tools in human volunteers. Your response to PETA and your recent Director’s message do not clarify or support the continuation of these experiments.

Your predecessors at NIMH, Tom Insel and Steven Hyman, acknowledged the inherent problems with the continued reliance on animal experimentation in mental health research.^{1,2} Recently the NIMH advisory council published concerns about the disproportionate amount of funding for basic science versus directly applicable research.³ And you yourself have spoken publicly about the failings of animal models of human affective states. It is deeply concerning that rather than utilize your current position and your obvious passion to help those suffering with mental illness to promote and support the most effective mental health research and interventions, you continue to fund even the most scientifically flawed and pointless animal experiments.

Quite frankly, it seems that you, Dr. Gordon, are exploiting the stigma mental health sufferers face by using it to defend NIMH’s outdated and ineffective research practices and priorities. PETA is not alone in stating that changes need to be made to significantly advance human mental health. Please see [here](#) for more about others, including those who treat and advocate for mental health patients, who are frustrated by NIMH’s funding policies.

The United States is currently facing a crisis of fact versus fiction. Too many individuals in leadership positions are unwilling to tell the truth out of fear of angering or alienating a significant percentage of their base supporters. It would be deeply disappointing if leaders in the scientific community resort to the same flawed and dangerous tactic of avoiding the hard but necessary truths needed to truly advance science out of fear of backlash from within the community they lead. Please don’t ignore the observations from your predecessors and numerous other scientists about the fundamental flaws in animal models out of loyalty to individual investigators. Please don’t dismiss PETA and others’ legitimate concerns about these experiments because you don’t like our tactics. And please don’t wait until you are on the way out the door to acknowledge the inherent problems associated with animal models of human mental health. By then it will be too late. There are 400 million people worldwide suffering with mental illness, and countless animals suffering in laboratories, waiting for you to do the right thing. Start by ending Elisabeth Murray’s experiments on monkeys.

¹ Hyman, S. E. (2012). Revolution stalled. *Science Translational Medicine*, 4(155), 155cm11-155cm11.

² Rogers, A. (2017). Star neuroscientist Tom Insel leaves the Google-spawned verily for a Startup. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2017/05/star-neuroscientist-tom-insel-leaves-google-spawned-verily-startup>

³ Lewis-Fernández, R., Rotheram-Borus, M. J., Betts, V. T., Greenman, L., Essock, S. M., Escobar, J. I., ... & DiClemente, R. J. (2016). Rethinking funding priorities in mental health research. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 208(6), 507-509.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katherine V. Roe'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Katherine' and last name 'Roe' clearly distinguishable.

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CC: National Advisory Mental Health Council