



November 1, 2023

Nora D. Volkow, M.D.
Director
National Institute on Drug Abuse

Via e-mail: nvolkow@mail.nih.gov

Dear Dr. Volkow:

I'm writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—PETA entities have more than 9 million members and supporters globally—to request that you implement a zero-tolerance policy targeting experimenters who blatantly disregard minimum federal animal welfare standards mandated by law, barring these individuals from any further contact with animals. I also request that you take personal responsibility for redirecting the endeavors of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) away from animal experimentation and toward non-animal, human-relevant research methods.

PETA obtained documents from the National Institutes of Health's Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW) with a final date of July 18, 2023¹ that detail an incident in which two squirrel monkeys developed burn-like lesions over a period of several days. Both primates underwent a positron emission tomography (PET) scan (a test that creates images of organs and tissues) as part of an experiment protocol. In the following couple of days, one of the monkeys developed burn-like lesions on their forearms. Several days later, the other monkey developed a similar burn-like lesion on their back. An assessment determined that the animals had sustained burns due to being near a heat source before or after the PET scans. A heat lamp was used for the monkeys prior to the scans, and a circulating water blanket was wrapped around them during these tests.

Additionally, the squirrel monkey who sustained burns on their forearms had an acute hyperthermic response to the heat lamp, their body temperature rising to 107 degrees. This response was detected when the monkey was transferred to the PET scanner, but the animal was still subjected to the test at that time.

Squirrel monkeys typically maintain a body temperature ranging from approximately 92.3 to 101.8 degrees, which may rise to 100.4 to 103.1 degrees while they're restrained. The average size of an adult squirrel monkey is only about 1 to 2 pounds in weight and 12 inches in height.

In this incident, the neglectful actions of NIDA staff caused two squirrel monkeys the unnecessary suffering and pain of burn-like lesions. The report concludes that these burns were likely due to the heat lamp or water blanket, and it was only after this incident that NIDA staff moved the heat lamp farther away

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¹The report is available at <https://www.peta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/case-18p.pdf>.

from the preparation table and replaced the water blanket with a new unit. The subcommittee reviewing the incident also recommended that animal temperatures should be continuously monitored throughout PET scan procedures, water blankets should be carefully inspected and confirmed to be at the correct temperature, and animals experiencing hyperthermia should be removed and rescheduled for a test. The lack of attention to the temperature and function of heat sources—generally known to have the possibility of causing burns—by NIDA staff caused unnecessary suffering and pain to these two monkeys.

This incident also suggests that NIDA's Animal Care and Use Committee may have failed to conduct a sufficiently thorough review of the proposed experiment, since details such as the proximity of the monkeys to the heat lamp, ensuring that equipment is inspected prior to use in order to verify proper functionality, and the necessity of monitoring the animals' body temperature during the scan were only added after the monkeys sustained burns.

The previous use of squirrel monkeys at NIDA included an experiment concerning opioid addiction. In addition to raising welfare concerns for the monkeys subjected to experiments, the results of addiction experiments on animals don't translate to humans. Unnatural laboratory conditions, physiological differences between species, the relative inability to measure emotional states in animals, and the complexity of human experiences in relation to addiction are just some of the problems with using animals to attempt to understand human addiction. So these experiments not only cause nonconsenting, vulnerable animals to suffer but also squander time, resources, and taxpayer money that could be better allocated to human-relevant research. The millions of people grappling with opioid addiction and their loved ones deserve the benefits of research that directly addresses their needs.

We ask that you address this serious matter and implement PETA scientists' [Research Modernization Deal](#)—a strategy for replacing animal experiments with modern, human-relevant, animal-free research methods.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions at AmandaSc@peta.org. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



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