



March 19, 2024

Axel Wolff, M.S., D.V.M.
Acting Director
Office of the Director
Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare
National Institutes of Health

Brent C. Morse, D.V.M.
Director
Division of Compliance Oversight
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Via e-mail: wolffa@od.nih.gov; MorseB@mail.nih.gov

Dear Drs. Wolff and Morse:

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 the Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW) investigate possible noncompliance with the Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (PHS Policy) in the use and treatment of animals by Augustine M.K. Choi, a Principal Investigator funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Dr. Choi is the former Stephen and Suzanne Weiss Dean of Weill Cornell Medicine (Animal Welfare Assurance ID D16-00186) and provost for medical affairs of Cornell University (Animal Welfare Assurance ID D16-00225). He has had at least ten publications retracted in the past several months for image duplication and/or manipulation.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10} Each of these publications was determined to have had either duplicated image panels, spliced images, and/or included images from previous publications.^{11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18} Additionally, at least four of Dr. Choi's publications have required corrections,^{19,20,21,22} and several other publications for which Dr. Choi is a co-author and/or corresponding author have concerns about duplicated or manipulated images^{23,24,25,26,27,28} noted on the online forum [PubPeer](https://pubpeer.com).

Dr. Choi has received more than \$71 million dollars of research funding from the NIH, and he is currently receiving funding through multiple active projects from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), including Projects P01-HL-114501, R33-HL-153011, and T32-HL-134629.

Several of the publications in question involve invasive procedures performed on live animals, including infecting mice with lethal doses of infectious agents, cecal ligation punctures used to induce sepsis in mice, and in some cases, procedures that induce lung fibrosis via silica administration.

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These research misconduct cases that involve experiments on animals indicate noncompliance with the PHS Policy.

The Health Research Extension Act of 1985 (HREA) provides the statutory mandate for the PHS Policy and asserts, “The Director of NIH shall require each applicant for a grant, contract, or cooperative agreement involving research on animals which is administered by the National Institutes of Health...a statement of the reasons for the use of animals in the research to be conducted with funds provided under such grant or contract.” §495(c)(2). If Dr. Choi engaged in research misconduct in projects with animals, as indicated by the publication retractions, such misconduct also calls into question the legitimacy of any statement of reasons that he provided for the use of animals.

Additionally, the [U.S. Government Principles for the Utilization and Care of Vertebrate Animals Used in Testing, Research, and Training](#), which are part of the PHS Policy, include the principle: “Procedures involving animals should be designed and performed with due consideration of their relevance to human or animal health, the advancement of knowledge, or the good of society.” Any research misconduct by Dr. Choi in projects with animals is out of line with this principle, since any results or publications that arise from the misconduct are not reliable and thus do not have relevance to human or animal health, do not advance knowledge, and do not contribute to the good of society. Rather, research misconduct may actually cause harm to human or animal health, hinder knowledge, and contribute to fraudulent and misinformed aspects of society—all in opposition to the NIH’s mission of “making important discoveries that improve health and save lives.”

Furthermore, the implementation of the PHS Policy by an institution with a PHS Assurance is reliant upon honesty and transparency from and between an investigator and other staff, the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), the institutional official (IO), the attending veterinarian, and the NIH. For example, under the PHS Policy, an IACUC must have procedures in place for reviewing concerns about possible non-compliance with the PHS Policy, the IO then has the responsibility to report non-compliance to OLAW, and OLAW decides on a response based on what has been reported. Any research misconduct by Dr. Choi in projects with animals undermines the NIH’s obligation to uphold the PHS Policy if Dr. Choi continues to receive NIH funding.

Research misconduct undermines the integrity of the scientific process, erodes public trust in research findings, and can have serious consequences for individuals, institutions, the broader scientific community, and the public at large. And when it comes to animal experimentation, research misconduct adds insult to literal injury and death.

Moreover, the prevalence of research misconduct in animal experimentation highlights a troubling trend in which experimenters prioritize generating publications over advancing medical progress. Instead of focusing on discovering cures or treatments, their primary measure of success lies in the quantity of publications produced, rather than the impact of their research on improving health and saving lives.

We urge you to investigate the concerns summarized in this letter and to take swift and decisive action against Dr. Choi to prevent him from using any NIH funding for projects involving animals. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Amanda Schemkes, J.D., M.S.
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¹Moon JS, Nakahira K, Chung KP, et al. NOX4-dependent fatty acid oxidation promotes NLRP3 inflammasome activation in macrophages [retracted in: *Nat Med.* 2023 Dec;29(12):3272]. *Nat Med.* 2016;22(9):1002-1012. doi:10.1038/nm.4153

²Moon JS, Hisata S, Park MA, et al. mTORC1-Induced HK1-Dependent Glycolysis Regulates NLRP3 Inflammasome Activation [retracted in: *Cell Rep.* 2023 Jun 27;42(6):112639]. *Cell Rep.* 2015;12(1):102-115. doi:10.1016/j.celrep.2015.05.046

³Ryter SW, Choi AM, Kim HP. Profibrogenic phenotype in caveolin-1 deficiency via differential regulation of STAT-1/3 proteins [retracted in: *Biochem Cell Biol.* 2023 Aug 1;101(4):380]. *Biochem Cell Biol.* 2014;92(5):370-378. doi:10.1139/bcb-2014-0075

⁴Siempos II, Ntaidou TK, Filippidis FT, Choi AM. RETRACTED: Effect of early versus late or no tracheostomy on mortality of critically ill patients receiving mechanical ventilation: a systematic review and meta-analysis [retracted in: *Lancet Respir Med.* 2015 Feb;3(2):102]. *Lancet Respir Med.* Published online June 26, 2014. doi:10.1016/S2213-2600(14)70125-0

⁵Slebos DJ, Ryter SW, van der Toorn M, et al. Mitochondrial localization and function of heme oxygenase-1 in cigarette smoke-induced cell death [retracted in: *Am J Respir Cell Mol Biol.* 2023 Apr;68(4):463]. *Am J Respir Cell Mol Biol.* 2007;36(4):409-417. doi:10.1165/rcmb.2006-0214OC

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