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Via email: jayanta.bhattacharya@nih.hhs.gov; adamsamy@mail.nih.gov; andrea.beckel-mitchener@nih.hhs.gov; bruce.tromberg@nih.hhs.gov

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya, Dr. Bany Adams, Dr. Beckel-Mitchener, and Dr. Tromberg:

I am writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and our more than 10.4 million members and supporters regarding deeply troubling information provided by insiders about the treatment of rhesus macaques in laboratories at the University of Minnesota (UMN). The concerns center on experiments funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and conducted by neuroscience professors Geoff Ghose and Jan Zimmermann and point to a disturbing pattern of invasive surgeries, apparent surgical incompetence, repeated complications, and a systemic failure of meaningful oversight.

According to the information shared with us, monkeys in these laboratories are subjected to craniotomies—procedures that involve cutting into the scalp, removing part of the skull, affixing headposts and cranial recording chambers to the skull, and implanting electrodes into the brain. After these surgeries, the monkeys are repeatedly restrained and forced to perform visual or behavioral tasks while neural activity is recorded. In some experiments, the visual development of infant monkeys was deliberately disrupted before they underwent these surgeries. Other monkeys were implanted with vascular ports, injected with neural tracers, or subjected to forced drug-administration paradigms. Ultimately, the monkeys are killed.

Craniotomies inherently carry a significant risk of infection because they breach the scalp and skull and leave permanent hardware protruding through the skin. Infection can inflame and degrade surrounding tissue and bone, weakening the

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stability of headposts and chambers so that they loosen, shift, or detach—necessitating additional interventions and compounding suffering. Insiders report that such complications have been disturbingly common in UMN's laboratories.
The case of a rhesus macaque named Everett illustrates the severity of these concerns. In November 2022, Zimmermann reportedly implanted a headpost and recording chamber using an excessive number of screws, approximately 20 of which protruded into brain tissue, some as deep as four millimeters. Over the following weeks, Everett exhibited lethargy, arm weakness suggestive of hemiparesis, repeated head pressing against cage surfaces (a likely sign of severe headache), vomiting, abnormal eye movements, worsening hair loss, and violent head shaking. Meaningful intervention appears to have been delayed for months. Everett was eventually deemed unfit for experimentation and euthanized—but only after prolonged and avoidable suffering.

Another monkey, Bilbo, suffered similarly alarming complications. During a corrective surgery in November 2022, a surgical tool reportedly penetrated approximately two centimeters into his brain. His heart rate spiked, he slipped out of the stereotaxic device meant to immobilize him during surgery, and a metal bar on the device struck his eye, injuring it. Later, after an unstable headpost was removed, Bilbo's cranial chamber fell off entirely, leaving a large wound at the site where the device had been anchored to his skull and exposing his brain. Despite this emergency, surgery to close the exposed site was reportedly delayed for *days*.

Other monkeys—including Gandalf, Elrond, and Ponyo—suffered hardware failures, prolonged surgeries lasting more than 14 hours, severe infections including MRSA, and repeated invasive procedures. In several cases, veterinarians and others reportedly raised concerns, yet corrective actions were limited to minor record-keeping recommendations or voluntary suspensions.

These disturbing incidents occurred in laboratories that continue to receive millions of dollars in NIH funding. Taxpayer dollars should not bankroll surgical incompetence, prolonged animal suffering, and repeated procedural failures. Yet that is precisely what is happening. Even more troubling, NIH funds have also flowed to NeuralThread, a San Francisco–based for-profit company that is using Zimmermann to conduct invasive brain surgeries on monkeys as part of its work. In effect, NIH funding is underwriting a private company's experiments in which monkeys' skulls are cut open, raising serious ethical and accountability concerns about the use of public funds to support invasive experiments on animals conducted for commercial gain.

Equally troubling is the role of the NIH's own oversight mechanisms. A UMN insider courageously reported these problems to the Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW), providing a detailed table documenting each problematic surgery, the experimenter responsible, the monkey involved, and the dates of the incidents. Rather than seriously investigating these allegations, OLAW reportedly limited its response to requesting vague descriptions of the university's policies and procedures, effectively glossing over the substantive concerns raised.

By doing so, OLAW not only failed in its duty to ensure that federally funded laboratories adhere to federal animal welfare standards—it also betrayed the trust of an individual who took significant personal risk to bring these concerns forward. Whistleblowers are essential to maintaining integrity and accountability in the research enterprise. When their detailed, good-faith reports are met with bureaucratic indifference, it sends a chilling message to others who might otherwise speak up.

Animals at UMN were failed at every level of oversight—from the experimenters themselves, to the university's animal care and use committee, to federal regulators, and ultimately to the agencies that fund this work. **NIH must not continue to finance laboratories where repeated surgical complications, infections, hardware detachments, and prolonged animal suffering are treated as routine costs of doing business.**

We therefore urge NIH to immediately investigate UMN's primate laboratories; suspend funding for these experiments pending the outcome of that investigation; review the appropriateness of NIH funding for NeuralThread's work with Zimmermann; and evaluate the adequacy of OLAW's response to the whistleblower complaint.

Taxpayers expect their dollars to support responsible, humane, and forward-looking science—not to subsidize avoidable suffering in laboratories that appear unable or unwilling to meet basic standards of animal welfare and professional competence.

The NIH has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to modernizing biomedical research by advancing innovative, human-relevant methodologies and reducing reliance on animal experimentation. The invasive monkey experiments conducted by Zimmermann and Ghose represent precisely the kind of outdated, harmful research that is out of step with today's scientific capabilities and ethical expectations and should no longer receive NIH support. We appreciate your attention to this matter. PETA's neuroscientists and primate scientists would welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you.

Sincerely,

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cc: Nicole Kleinstreuer, Ph.D., Director, Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives