

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 6, 2017

The Honorable David Shulkin
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

We write today concerning the recent Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Office of Research Oversight (ORO) report pertaining to large animal research testing that was conducted at the Hunter Holmes McGuire Veterans Affairs Medical Center (McGuire) in Richmond, Virginia in 2015 and 2016. The report dated May 30, 2017 examined seven allegations: three related to alleged animal welfare abuses and four related to recordkeeping and reporting inaccuracies.

The ORO conducted its report following a complaint referral made by the Office of the Inspector General. The ORO found that a Principal Investigator (PI) conducting canine research at McGuire inadvertently damaged lung tissue in a canine that died due to unanticipated complications, inappropriately administered a sedative, and failed to provide adequate postoperative care to an animal following a surgical procedure. The ORO report also identified instances of deviation from procedures described in approved research protocols and noted a lack of adherence to the written Program of Veterinary Care.

We understand that the initial complaint and corrective actions taken resulted from diligent self-reporting by the professional staff at McGuire. We are encouraged by the report's conclusion that McGuire staff self-reported incidents to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and worked with the local Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) to implement corrective actions – including suspending the PI from conducting animal research.

However, we would like to see more done to improve the transparency and accuracy of reporting about research conducted on canines. Fortunately, deficiencies in the reporting process were self-identified by an employee, but ORO found that the facility's whistleblower guidelines did not provide clear instruction on how to anonymously report concerns. Therefore, we encourage you to ensure this deficiency is addressed and recommend you work with the IACUC and other facilities to revise, and update if needed, whistleblower guidelines to help ensure transparency and accountability.

We also urge you to swiftly implement the ORO report's required actions, in particular the requirement to develop a system to effectively track animal usage to ensure that reports accurately list the numbers of animals used or held for research. We also believe the VA should work closely with McGuire and other VA facilities that engage in animal testing to ensure these medical centers fully understand USDA's reporting requirements for animal testing – whether

funded by the VA, other federal research funds, or non-profit organizations – to prevent further inaccuracies.

While the ORO report raised serious concerns that should be addressed, we applaud the proactive steps taken by McGuire to self-correct and we strongly support the critical research and development performed by the VA. We understand how critically important R&D is for fostering innovative breakthroughs in medical care, including the use of humane animal testing in cases where tests are essential to advancing public health and alternatives are unavailable. For decades, the VA has been a leader in medical research, and we want to ensure the Department is able to continue to innovate and provide the best care possible for our veterans.

Thank you and we look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator