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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0918

April 19, 2023

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write today to express our concerns about your personal approval of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) plans to initiate a new invasive experiment on cats. The decision appears to be at odds with Congressional intent, federal law, and the VA's own animal research policy and agency efforts to eliminate the use of cats.

In June 2022, you notified Congress, as required by federal law, that you approved a new study at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center that entails implanting up to seven cats with an experimental medical device for six months to determine its durability. In your letter to Congress, you justified the study by writing that, "FDA requires that the [device] be tested in living animals before being further studied in human patients."

However, as you are aware, federal law was recently amended to remove the FDA's outdated, burdensome, and unnecessary animal testing requirements.

Additionally, since 2019 Congress has defunded VA testing on cats—as well as dogs and primates—unless "the scientific objectives of the research can only be met by using such canines, felines, or non-human primates." Congress has also directed the VA to phase-out the use of these species by 2025. The VA has stated that it "is completely aligned with Congressional calls to reduce the use of sensitive species (canine, feline, non-human primate) in VA research studies" and has implemented a plan "to eliminate or reduce the use of canines, felines, and non-human primates in VA research."

Other federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, have determined that alternatives to the use of companion animals to meet FDA requirements are available. We are concerned that the new cat experiments you approved are not legally required, not scientifically necessary, and may be at odds with federal law governing the VA's animal research. Documents released through the Freedom of Information Act to the non-profit White Coat Waste Project show that several cats involved in related medical device experiments at Stokes have been euthanized in recent years following surgical complications that left them injured or immobile.

Please provide us with the following information:

- Has the Stokes VA's new cat experiment commenced? If so, when did it begin and when is it scheduled to end?
- How much taxpayer money is the VA planning to spend on the cat experiments?
- In light of the December 29, 2022, change in federal law removing the only justification you provided for personally approving this experiment, is it your continued position that the feline study is:
 - a) a justified use of taxpayer funds,
 - b) the only way that the scientific objectives of this research could be met, and
 - c) required for the regulatory approval of the experimental medical devices in question?

- When was the last time the Stokes VA explored alternatives to the use of cats in this experiment?
- Has the VA met with the FDA to specifically discuss whether the use of cats is necessary to meet regulatory requirements? If so, when, with whom, and what was discussed?

We appreciate the progress the VA has made to eliminate its painful dog testing and reduce its cat and primate experimentation in recent years and for deeming lab animal retirement an "ethical obligation." In view of this, and the information above, we ask that you carefully reconsider your approval of the Stokes VA's new cat experiment.

Sincerely,



Brian Mast
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress