

November 18, 2020

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Senate Appropriations
Military Construction, Veterans
Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Chair, House Appropriations
Military Construction, Veterans
Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations
Military Construction, Veterans
Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Carter
Ranking Member, House Appropriations
Military Construction, Veterans
Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Boozman, Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, and Ranking Members Schatz and Carter:

The American Physiological Society (APS) thanks you for your support of the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program. This program seeks to develop new treatments and technologies that address the medical needs of veterans. We therefore urge you to approve the \$840 million provided under the House bill for FY 2021.

At the same time, APS is concerned about arbitrary restrictions on lifesaving VA medical research involving animals that were included in both bills. These restrictions are unnecessary because the VA has already implemented stringent internal review and prior approval procedures for this research. As you finalize the VA's FY 2021 appropriation, APS therefore urges you to lift these restrictions so that the research can proceed apace.

VA canine research has led to discoveries such as the cardiac pacemaker, liver transplantation, and treatments for cardiac arrhythmias. Most recently, VA canine research was pivotal in the development of a lifesaving device that allows paralyzed veterans to breathe without a ventilator; cough effectively; and even sing. Being able to do these things dramatically improves their quality of life while also reducing the need for bulky and obtrusive equipment, constant attendance by caregivers, and hospitalizations for respiratory infections. Critical parts of the research that led to these discoveries could not have been funded by VA under the restrictions in the House and Senate bills.

Section 246 of H.R. 7609 as passed by the House prohibits any canine research classified as USDA pain Category D or E. USDA's annual report form states that Category D refers to research procedures that might cause "pain or distress to the animals and for which appropriate anesthetic, analgesic, or



tranquilizing drugs were used.”¹ This would apply to any surgery, which, for humans as well as animals, can include some post-operative pain. Category D means that pain is minimized because animals are monitored carefully as they recover and provided drugs intended to alleviate their pain and/or relieve their distress. APS therefore believes that Congress should not prohibit Category D research.

Section 249 of the Senate bill contains an even more sweeping prohibition against research involving canines, felines, or nonhuman primates (NHPs) unless the scientific objectives of the study are “directly related to an illness or injury that is combat-related.” The VA health system treats veterans suffering from both combat and non-combat related conditions, and the Medical and Prosthetic Research program is intended to improve this care. In the Senate report, the Committee commends the VA for the “ongoing partnerships between VA medical centers and National Cancer Institute [NCI]-designated comprehensive cancer centers.” The VA treats veterans with cancer whether the disease is combat-related or not. Why prohibit efforts to improve treatment for other non-combat-related conditions simply because they require particular research models?

The Senate bill also calls for the VA to submit to Congress by December 31, 2020, a 5-year plan to begin phasing out research with canines, felines, and NHPs. APS strongly objects to this because it could do a grave disservice. Our current efforts to find safe and effective vaccines and treatments for COVID-19 have been heavily dependent upon NHPs. VA should not arbitrarily be required to draw down its research with certain animals because they may be needed in the future to address similarly serious issues affecting the health and well-being of our veterans.

APS urges you to strike both Section 246 of the House-passed bill and Section 249 of the Senate Committee bill. We are happy to provide additional information on these matters.

Sincerely,

Dennis Brown, PhD
Chief Science Officer

Cc:

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby, Chairman, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Nita N. Lowey, Chairwoman, House Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Kay Granger, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee

¹ USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Annual Report of Research Facility. URL: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/library/forms/pdf/APHIS_7023.pdf.



Physiology is a broad area of scientific inquiry that focuses on how molecules, cells, tissues and organs function in health and disease. The American Physiological Society connects a global, multidisciplinary community of more than 10,000 biomedical scientists and educators as part of its mission to advance scientific discovery, understand life and improve health. The Society drives collaboration and spotlights scientific discoveries through its 16 scholarly journals and programming that support researchers and educators in their work.