



May 15, 2019

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Brian Schatz, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Schatz:

As an association of biomedical researchers who strongly support the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program, the American Physiological Society urges you to delete Section 247 from the House's FY 2020 Military Construction-Veterans Affairs appropriations bill. This section would prohibit the VA from conducting canine research that falls under USDA pain and distress categories D or E. This would halt current research needed to provide better treatments for cardiac arrhythmias and spinal cord injuries. It would also permanently bar VA from future research to help veterans when dogs are needed as the research model for a human disease.

Section 247 stems from serious misconceptions about what these kinds of research entail and the significance the research has for our veterans. All VA research with dogs is subject to the regulations and welfare requirements of the Animal Welfare Act and the Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. In addition, VA policy allows research with dogs in only very limited circumstances after a proposal has gone through a multi-stage internal review process. As explained in a VA overview of this research:

“VA conducts canine research only when the research question is **scientifically important**, when the use of an **animal model is necessary**, when the **animals will be humanely treated**, and when the **canine model is the only adequate [research] model.**”¹ (Emphases added.)

It is troubling that Section 247 has been portrayed as necessary to prevent researchers from gratuitously inflicting pain on animals. This portrayal reflects a serious misunderstanding of research ethics as well as of USDA's pain categories. The pain categories were put in place to ensure thorough scrutiny of research with the potential to cause significant pain and distress to animals. Before Category D or E proposals can be approved, a thorough justification of scientific necessity must be provided, and there is extensive discussion of what measures can be taken to limit the animals' pain and distress. Once approved, research in these categories is subject to careful oversight to ensure that the animals' pain and distress are kept to a minimum.

Animals in Category D research at the VA typically undergo surgical procedures necessary to study health problems veterans are experiencing. The animals are anesthetized during the surgery and given analgesics to relieve pain as well as other kinds of comfort care while they recover. Category E research is reserved for rare cases where it is difficult to predict the effectiveness of pain control measures or when

¹Canine Research at the Department of Veterans Affairs, April 2019. URL:

https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal_research/canine_research/VA-Canine-Research-Brochure.pdf

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analgesics would interfere with the biological process under study.² According to USDA, across the U.S. very few animals—less than 1%—are assigned to Category E. These animals are observed closely and are taken off the study or euthanized if they show signs of reaching a predetermined, unacceptable level of pain.

If doctors were to apply USDA's pain and distress categories to human medicine, procedures ranging from heart valve, hip and knee replacements to breast biopsies and pulling wisdom teeth might be put into Category E because post-surgical pain is possible despite the use of pain-relieving drugs.

In recent years, VA's small canine research program has produced important advances in treatment for heart disease and spinal cord injury:

- VA researchers confirmed that a common heart rhythm problem known as premature ventricular contractions (PVCs) can lead to the development of heart failure, a serious condition that leads to premature death. Dogs were necessary for this research because they are the only animals whose hearts are known to be regulated by an electrical system similar to that of humans.
- VA researchers also developed a cough stimulator, which has greatly improved the lives of paralyzed veterans who require a ventilator or are otherwise unable to cough effectively on their own.

We urge you to eliminate Section 247 because, as VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told the National Press Club last year, this research provides “an opportunity to change the lives of men and women who have been terribly hurt.”

Sincerely,

Meredith Hay, PhD
President

The American Physiological Society is an association of researchers working work at the frontiers of science to advance our understanding of life and health. Their efforts are leading to treatments for deadly and debilitating diseases including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease. Society members conduct research at colleges, universities, medical schools and other research institutions across the U.S., including at government facilities such as the VA.

²Research on pain management is also classified as Category E because administering pain-relieving medications would make it impossible to know whether a new treatment is effective. VA does not currently have any dog research of this kind.