

The Michigan Daily

'U' under pressure for dog testing

Group files request for investigation with Department of Agriculture

By Kyle Swanson

Daily Staff Reporter On January 14th, 2009

The University of Michigan Health System's practice of using live animals to train doctors enrolled in its Advanced Trauma Life Support course came under fire yesterday when a federal complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, alleging that the University is in violation of the Animal Welfare Act.

The complaint, filed by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, claimed that Dr. Richard Burney, a professor of surgery in the Medical School, made false statements in his recommendation to a University committee in order to gain permission to use live animals for his course. The complaint also alleges that he gained permission to use the live animals when alternative methods of training have been approved by the American College of Surgeons.

Burney's course currently uses dogs acquired through a private research firm from shelters in Mescota and Gratiot Counties. The dogs are put under anesthesia and used as practice dummies for life-saving procedures. The dogs are then euthanized after procedures due to severe injuries.

The University Committee on Use and Care of Animals has approved the practice, but Dr. John Pippin, senior medical and research advisor to PCRM and author of the complaint, claims false statements by Burney may have led to the committee's decision.

"We believe that this animal use is a violation of the Animal Welfare Act because the principal investigator provided false information about alternative non-animal technologies to justify animal use in his (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee) protocol," Pippin wrote in his complaint to the Department of Agriculture.

Pippin said the University could easily use cadavers or human body models as alternatives to live animals.

The University is currently in possession of a TramaMan System, one of the best alternative methods for this type of training, Pippin said. A TramaMan system is an anatomical human body designed for students to practice emergency surgical procedures.

Pippin is asking the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to investigate the matter.

In an interview yesterday, Pippin did admit that it wouldn't be illegal to use live animals for this purpose if disclosed properly, but said he wasn't approaching this from a legal

standpoint.

“It’s not illegal to use animals for this purpose, but it also is not necessary,” he said. “Our appeal to Dr. Burney all along has not been based on legal issues, but based on best practices.”

Pippin said PCRM began conversations with Burney in Aug. 2006, encouraging him not to use animals for ATLS courses. However, he said Burney has stated consistently that he wanted to use live animals over simulator programs.

Howard Rush, director of the unit for laboratory medicine at the University of Michigan Health System, said UCUCA thought Burney’s recommendation to use animals in ATLS courses was appropriate, and so they approved his request.

“There’s more than one way to teach these courses, and Dr. Burney’s explanation seemed quite appropriate,” he said. “From his perspective the use of a live animal is much more realistic and much more like what a physician would encounter in an emergency room, compared to the use of a mannequin.”

Rush called the number of animals used over the course of a year for Burney’s ATLS courses very small, estimating that approximately 20 animals are used each year.

Despite pressure from Pippin and the PCRM, Rush said it would be left to Burney to decide whether to continue using animals for ATLS courses.

“That wouldn’t be a decision that would be imposed on Dr. Burney by the University Committee on the Use and Care of Animals,” he said. “That’s a decision he has to make.”

A statement released yesterday by the University’s Health System in response to an article by the Detroit Free Press refuted several of Pippin’s claims.

“Advanced Trauma Life Support courses provide highly-specialized surgeons the training they need to evaluate and manage patients with acute life-threatening injuries during the first hour after a trauma incident,” the statement said. “The majority of medical schools teaching ATLS courses use live, anesthetized animals because they, like U-M experts, believe it is essential for expert training.”

Additionally, the statement called PCRM an animal right’s group, saying it is largely funded by PETA — People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals — and that less than 10 percent of its members are physicians.

According to the University’s statement, the University is in compliance with all state and federal regulations on humane animal care.

“U-M meets or exceeds the high standards of humane care for research animals that are required under its own rules as well as state and federal rules,” the statement said. “The University Committee on Use and Care of Animals, made up of scientists, non-scientists, citizens and veterinarians, must approve and supervise every research project that uses animals to make sure the animals are well cared for and humanely treated.”

In the interview yesterday, Pippin said he thinks the University is on par with its peers with respect to the training of medical school students, but said he has concerns about the ATLS program.

“We certainly don’t have a beef against the University of Michigan,” he said. “We think the U-M has been quite progressive in its medical student curriculum, but for this ATLS program, which is individual driven . . . we would like to prevail on (Dr. Burney) to open his mind and look at what’s going on around him and make the change to use these simulators, which provide better training.”

Printed from www.michigandaily.com on Thu, 15 Jan 2009 12:32:08 -0500