

Christina R. Vancheri

Christina R. Vancheri
3358 Perrysville Ave. Apt. 2
Pittsburgh, PA 15214

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Members of the Judiciary Committee
Pennsylvania State House of Representatives
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I am writing to address HB 873 -The Laboratory Animal Bill and relate my laboratory experiences to the necessity for its passage.

I was employed at Letterman Army Institute of Research (LAIR), Presidio of San Francisco as a medical illustrator from 1979 to 1984. At this writing, the entire base has been scheduled to close along with other obsolete U.S. bases. However, the animal research facility is reportedly "up for grabs" by California universities. I will attempt to give you an inside picture of what work is like in such a facility. I have since learned from other laboratory workers it is fairly typical.

Built in the early 70's with the promise of the continuance of the Vietnam War, LAIR has served to warehouse medicos conducting research for WWII. With each peaceful passing year, its future became tentative, and LAIR evolved into a landlord agency for other research units such as USDA. The Reagan years bestowed added perks for the military and the prospect of war in the Middle East and Central America. At the time of my arrival, it had already earned a solid reputation for redundant research and dubious use of human guinea pigs.

Time and distance have not dulled LAIR's images. A foul term was often used by military officials referring to LAIR's competitive status. Which Department of Defense sister labs could command the greatest prestige? The arrogant aplomb with which researchers bargained, manipulated protocols and animals used in multiple experiments over and over in order to justify their continuance was the first indication of the callousness I was to experience. Each repetition involved the most minute changes.

My contact with animals was sporadic and inadvertent, as my civilian position was sequestered in an annex off limits to labs. I quickly learned that one lab department could be completely ignorant of what an adjacent lab's research involved. The atmosphere of secrecy was pervasive nor was dissent tolerated. Approximately 2,000 animals were housed in a block-long, windowless building. Occasionally, the media would be called anonymously by someone concerned about a particular animal. The media was denied access to the primate colony - by reason of quarantine. However, military personnel, who changed regularly were not considered to be contaminating factors. A young military woman complained to me about her assignment to "wholesale slaughter" of research pigs. The euthanizing drug was taking too long to work, leaving the pigs writhing and squealing about the lab before death. Her requests for alternative "solutions" were unheeded.

Only once was I requested to draw in the operating room. "You'd better work fast," the veterinarian told me, "the pigs usually die during heart catheterization." I declined the invitation and was later reprimanded. Procedural mishaps, I was to learn, were common. One animal care worker claimed technical failures before, during and after experiments accounted for 50% of the animals. I was astounded to learn that primates undergoing repeated severe laser damage to their eyes were immobilized in stereotaxic devices for years! The reason: The monkeys were too strong and wiry to be restrained for each laser exposure. These Rhesus monkeys were elaborately conditioned to respond to visual cues - Tang as the reward and electric shock as punishment. At one point I was presented with a set of photos of a "chaired" monkey by an investigator. Would I illustrate for a journal, only render the animal more comfortable with more arm and torso room? I was not-so-gently chided for declining and asking "irrelevant" questions. It was peculiar to me how some LAIR investigators denied the sentience of animals, while others explored and monitored the ramifications of prolonged pain. One set of studies required a "guest" researcher, and involved deafferentation (surgical severing of nerves) in order to develop "pain-free" animals.

Once, I lunched with a new employee who invited me to tour the insectary. In an interior room stacked with cases teeming with mosquitoes, a glass container held a tiny, writhing mouse. His body was encrusted with fleas feeding through his nearly hairless body. Later, I observed a similar "event" being filmed. This time the shaved backs of rabbits were used for mosquito nourishment. Animals were also used for biological and chemical warfare agents such as nerve and mustard gases. I witnessed huge ulcerations on the backs of dying rabbits injected with mustard gas.

A landmark addition to LAIR was the ballistics lab or "shooting gallery." Dead or moribund pigs fresh from other procedures were shot. Finally, there was my chagrined friend who had been promised a cat by a researcher. But the cat, as well as the entire group imported from an Ohio breeder, died due to malfunction of the endotracheal tube. Their lungs had burst during the experiment.

I drew countless diagrams, charts, graphs and slides representing the tortured lives and deaths of hundreds of animals. I observed an animal being bled to death. I recorded lethal dose and Draize tests which were ongoing staples. Dots, Xs and circles measured the results of induced shock, poisons, exsanguination, irradiation, contaminants, insecticides, bullets and trauma on dogs, pigs, rodents, turtles, primates and cats.

LAIR was then, like other federal facilities, exempt from the Animal Welfare Act. Officials touted the high ratio of veterinarians to animals. Mr. Avanzino of the San Francisco Humane Society was aware of LAIR atrocities, but was frustrated and helpless. His cruelty jurisdiction ended at federal doors. Periodically, LAIR officials would warn 300 staff members in auditorium lectures that "our mission here is not cocktail hour conversation." These group addresses progressed to slide shows of convicted traitors with broad threats of treason charges for anyone acting on "animal rights" notions.

Significantly, LAIR ceased publishing annual reports in 1982. Public pay phones had been removed from the building, and desk phones were computer monitored to eavesdrop. My responsibilities also included chart preparations for the annual rudimentary inspection by the USDA. These indicated temperature of rooms where animals were housed. At no time did any outside agency or internal institutional care committee challenge the nature of research conducted. One researcher was warned about wasting too many pigs (over 200) in trauma studies.

In the early 1980's, the International Primate Protection League (IPPL) had reviewed LAIR autopsy reports of monkey deaths due to dehydration, vermin infestation, and accidental poisoning. Two mysterious deaths had the earmarks of "primate suicide." A healthy monkey died in a restraining device after much stressful struggling and gasping. Another chewed into her femoral artery and bled to death. Martha, a monkey who died in 1984 became the public symbol of LAIR's abuses. After a restrained lifetime of laser blasts to her eyes, she was shipped to another facility and fatally infected with schistosomiasis. The controversy over her life and death became a turning point for outside interest in LAIR.

One facet of military research was publicly heralded as correlating to human health - the prospect of perfecting reconstituted "freeze-dried blood." The primary researcher, while ruefully accounting the status of his investigations, told of the "inside joke" of bets taken on how many animals would die "feet up" or "feet down" after infusion. My account here is intended to exemplify and "bring home" some personalized accounts of animal research. I could elaborate on the subtle and overt methods of intimidation. It is not a pleasant feeling when friends and associates recoil upon awareness of my association with activities I have described.

Because of my experiences, I strongly feel the need for legislative intervention in the animal research scenario. Testimony from the fall hearing on HB1554 revealed a faltering system of inspection. Researchers are by and large arrogantly indignant at the notion of accountability of any kind. And as my LAIR co-worker warned: "All of our jobs are at stake in this animal thing."

I hope you will seriously take into account my testimony, and work to ensure future protection for all laboratory animals. Thank you for your attention to HB873.

Sincerely,



Christina R. Vancheri