The University of Washington may have to pay back some federal research grant money because of ongoing oversight problems at its controversial primate-research center, UW and federal officials have confirmed.

The problems stem from unapproved surgical procedures done on monkeys during research funded by the National Eye Institute, a federal agency, said Nona Phillips, director of the UW's Office of Animal Welfare.

Documents obtained under public-disclosure laws cite dozens of such surgeries in the labs of neurosciences researchers studying the relationship between the brain and eye movement.

The UW says the problems amount to a paperwork glitch that inadvertently omitted mention of particular surgeries during revisions of research protocols, which must be approved by a UW committee before research can proceed.

The UW says it has taken steps to improve oversight, and the federal agency responsible for ensuring the "humane care and use" of animals in research, the Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW), has said it is satisfied by those steps and has closed the case.

But the possibility that grant money may have to be refunded "is still under consideration and investigation," said Dr. Michael Oberdorfer, a program director at the National Eye Institute, part of the federal National Institutes of Health.

And activists who have long targeted the UW's primate center as cruel and inhumane say it proves the UW is not taking seriously orders to clean up its practices at the Washington National Primate Research Center on the UW campus.

"The fact that the UW characterizes this incident — 41 surgeries on 14 monkeys — as a clerical error seems unduly dismissive to me," said Debra Durham, the Seattle-based primate specialist for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

"Ethically speaking, we can't afford to lose sight of the animals. For them, the difference between two surgeries and six or 10 is much more than paperwork."

Previous problems

The recent troubles are the latest in a long string of problems for the UW's animal-research facilities.

In 1995, the university risked losing U.S. Department of Agriculture accreditation for its primate-breeding facility near Spokane when five baboons died of cold-weather exposure or thirst. The school paid a fine and
closed the aging facility.

In late 2006, the UW was put on probation by the facilities accrediting agency, the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC). Although inspectors praised the UW for its veterinary care and medical record-keeping, they noted "serious deficiencies" in animal-research facilities in Seattle, including monkey labs that leaked steam from a cage-washing device, inadequate lighting, and lack of alarms to alert people in case of heating or air-conditioning failure.

The UW's Phillips said the university has corrected all the deficiencies, except those that require remodeling of the facility, and that's being planned. But the UW is still on probation from AAALAC.

The most recent problems were brought to the attention of federal agencies in late 2006 by a Cincinnati animal activist, Michael Budkie, who heads a group called Stop Animal Exploitation Now!, or SAEN. Budkie complained that certain monkeys used in neurosciences studies were being mistreated.

After a three-day visit in late October 2006, a USDA inspector dismissed most of Budkie's allegations but noted that "many discrepancies were uncovered" in animal research done by Albert Fuchs, a neurosciences researcher studying how the brain controls eye movement.

The inspector said some monkeys had received many more surgeries than were allowed in the protocols approved by the UW's animal-welfare oversight committee, the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, as well as surgeries that were "outside the realm" of the protocols.

Primate A01136, a rhesus macaque, for example, died after eight surgeries, including one that removed a section of its cranial bone and installed a recording cylinder on its brain with acrylic and screws. The approved protocol called for only two minor surgeries, with possible need for readjustment or repair.

Two other primates also had undergone more surgeries than called for in the protocols, the inspector said.

In addition, the approved protocols didn't specify the way that researchers were supposed to drill through the monkey's eye-socket bone to run wires from an implant to a screw in the skull.

The inspector also criticized Fuchs for saying his animals had experienced no unexpected adverse events or deaths in the past year, even though the macaque called A01136 had died, apparently of hypothermia after surgery.

The federal OLAW office closed the UW's case in March 2007 but reopened it in May after PETA complained about more unauthorized surgeries and unacceptable sterilization of the implants being used.

The federal animal-welfare office told the UW to review five years' worth of neuroscience primate protocols and animal records. Phillips said that hadn't been done before because it was assumed the USDA inspector had identified all nonapproved procedures in her report.

That review found two additional researchers' labs had performed unauthorized surgeries — a total of 39 unapproved surgeries on 16 monkeys over four years.

**Figures uncertain**

Altogether, the grants for the three neurosciences researchers for the periods covered by the unapproved surgeries total several million dollars, though no one can agree on the exact figure.
The researchers say they're trying to learn how the brain controls movement, in an effort to improve treatment of stroke and other brain disorders.

Phillips said there is no indication the UW could lose entire grants. But she said it might have to refund what was spent on the unauthorized surgeries and care afterward, which the UW has calculated at more than $189,000.

Phillips said the unauthorized surgeries occurred because an update of research protocols mistakenly removed wording noting that if hardware placed in animals' heads broke or needed to be readjusted, later surgeries would be required.

As for the sterilization of implants, the UW said it has changed to a different sterilizing solution, even though it denies a problem with the old formula.

Phillips stresses that federal inspectors found no "animal mistreatment or animal suffering," and she expressed frustration that critics claim otherwise.

"The university has a clean slate on that," Phillips said.

In a letter to the UW on March 3, an OLAW director wrote that the agency was satisfied the UW "has implemented measures to correct and prevent recurrence of the original problem," and would inform PETA that the allegations it raised have been "appropriately addressed."

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