

September 19, 2007

Dr. Catharine Bond Hill, President
Vassar College
124 Raymond Ave.
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604

Dear Dr. Hill:

On behalf of PETA and our more than 1.6 million members and supporters worldwide, I am writing to ask you to investigate disturbing information that we recently received regarding the treatment of animals in laboratories at Vassar. We believe that the conduct at issue violates state law and is contrary to federal law and policy that governs the use of animals in laboratories.

We are advised by a whistleblower who has attested to the allegations contained in this letter that flocks of finches are crowded into cages in a windowless basement laboratory in Olmsted Hall. The finches reportedly exhibit signs of severe psychological stress, including feather-plucking. Sick and injured birds have allegedly been left to suffer for many days without necessary veterinary care. We also understand that these conditions were reported several times to laboratory supervisors Richard Hemmes and Julie Williams but that no corrective action was taken and animals continued to suffer.

The whistleblower, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, also witnessed the following:

- A finch was no longer able to sit on his perch and seemed to lack balance and coordination. An employee's report to supervisors that the bird was in "obvious discomfort" was ignored, and the bird suffered for a week before he was euthanized.
- A finch had caught and injured his foot in the wire mesh of his cage. Again, supervisors ignored reports and waited a week before amputating the bird's entire leg.
- A finch suffered a severe head injury that caused the left side of his head to swell and obstructed the vision in his left eye. Once more, complaints fell on deaf ears. The bird suffered for a week before he was found dead in her cage, with blood "everywhere," according to one employee.
- A female quail had a large, open, bloody wound on her back as a result of the tiny brooder enclosure in which she was housed. The height of each compartment is less than a foot, and the birds, who stand half the height of the enclosure, frequently jump up and sustain injuries. The quail had to be euthanized.



PETA

PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

501 FRONT ST.
NORFOLK, VA 23510
757-622-PETA
757-622-0457 (FAX)

PETA.org
Info@peta.org

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TO PROTECTING
THE RIGHTS OF ALL ANIMALS

We are told that supervisors ignored each report of suffering by claiming that they had every right to do to the animals “whatever we want, whenever we want.” This attitude is in direct contravention of state law that prohibits cruelty to animals, including the denial of veterinary care for sick and injured animals and the denial of euthanasia for animals in severe or chronic pain that cannot or will not be relieved. N.Y. Agric. & Mkts. Law § 353 authorizes prosecution of perpetrators of cruelty who are engaged in “scientific tests, experiments or investigations involving the use of living animals” when the conduct falls outside the scope of the enumerated activities, as is the case here, and when the conduct is the result of scientific tests, experiments, or investigations that are not “properly conducted.” Although the New York Assembly chose to exempt conduct associated with carefully planned and vigilantly monitored scientific experiments from prosecution under the cruelty statute, it also recognized the need to limit the exemption in order to prohibit cruel behavior by individuals and institutions for whom compliance with approved research protocols and basic animal husbandry constitutes an “inconvenience” and who therefore fail to protect animals against the unjustifiable pain and suffering that § 353 was designed to prevent. As you can see, the allegation of misconduct by employees of Vassar is a serious matter that deserves the immediate, undivided attention of the college.

In addition to these disturbing allegations against Vassar’s laboratory employees and supervisors, we also want to draw your attention to the questionable nature of the experiments for which these finches are being used. Jeffrey Cynx in the Department of Psychology has spent the last 23 years confining zebra finches and European starlings to small cages. He has cut into the birds’ backs to implant testosterone-filled tubes; castrated male birds by suctioning testicular tissue and cauterizing the affected area; burned lesions into the left and right hemispheres of the thalamus region of the finches’ brains; and cut into birds’ throats and ripped out the tracheal nerves—simply to consider the impact of these mutilations on the birds’ songs.

These experiments do not appear to comport with the U.S. Government Principles for the Utilization and Care of Vertebrate Animals Used in Testing, Research, and Training, endorsed by American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, in particular Principle II, which states, “Procedures involving animals should be designed and performed with due consideration of their relevance to human or animal health, the advancement of knowledge, or the good of society.” I think the public will agree that the pain and suffering inflicted on these animals is both unacceptable and unnecessary, and a poor reflection on Vassar College and the professional credibility of Vassar College’s Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, as well as a waste of funds obtained from the Vassar Undergraduate Research Summer Institute and a Vassar Faculty Research grant.

Please investigate these allegations regarding the housing and care of the birds in Olmsted Hall and elsewhere at Vassar. We ask that you immediately end any invasive studies on birds. May I please hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alka Chandna". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alka Chandna, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher

cc: The Honorable William V. Grady, District Attorney, Dutchess County