

Georgia Tawharu

From: president@vuwsa.org.nz
Sent: Wednesday, 6 November 2019 6:46 PM
To: AEC Admin
Subject: Correspondence from VUWSA
Attachments: Letter to AEC VUWSA.docx

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Completed

Tēnā koutou katoa,

Please see the attached letter,

Ngā mihi

Tamatha Paul

Ngāti Awa, Waikato-Tainui

President

Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association

Te Rōpū Tauira o te Kura Wānanga o te Upoko o te Ika a Māui

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TO	Victoria University of Wellington Animal Ethics Committee
FROM	Tamatha Paul, President of Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association

Wednesday 6th November,

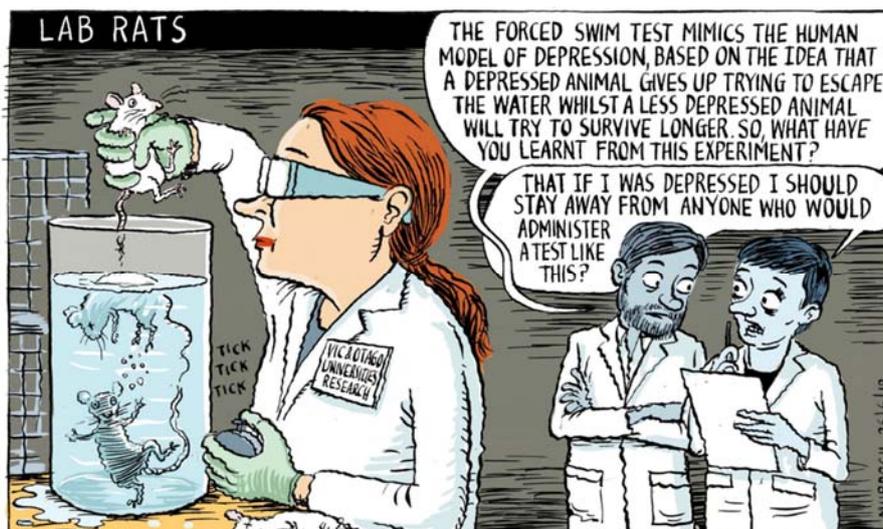
Dear Bart Ellenbroek and other members of the Victoria University of Wellington Animal Ethics Committee,

I am writing on behalf of the Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA) and the study body which I proudly represent as VUWSA President.

I want to highlight to members of your committee an important issue that has been brought to my attention.

I've discovered that Victoria University has recently approved the use of and has conducted the Forced Swim Test. While I am aware that there are currently no Forced Swim Test experiments underway at our institute, there is nothing to prevent this from happening again in the near or distant future and I find this very concerning.

I've seen this issue in the [media](#) multiple times over the past month and it isn't making our institute look as progressive as I believe (and hope) that it is. One particular image that I've seen, portrays our staff and students in a very embarrassing light. The image that I'm referring to was featured in the Dominion Post and was created by artist Sharon Murdoch (see image below).



People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) scientists discovered that that in the US, over 30 years from 1989 to 2018, experimenters gave animals 47 different test drug compounds before subjecting them to the Forced Swim Test. 36 of them "showed promise" based on the invalid

interpretation of the test. But exactly zero of those are now on the market to treat human depression.

To add weight to this, [an analysis](#) conducted with data from four major pharmaceutical companies found that the Forced Swim Test was less predictive than chance at determining if a compound would have antidepressant efficacy in humans.

I can understand why members of the public are so outraged at our use of this test – it sounds horrible and the science behind it is incredibly flawed!

The Forced Swim Test doesn't predict how humans will respond to drugs and has no relevance to human depression. It's well known that the causes of depression are not adequately understood yet, and many different factors could contribute to symptoms of depression in humans. I think it's unjust to humans as well as animals if we continue to use this test.

Even scientists themselves are [speaking out](#) against the Forced Swim Test due to its lack of merit.

The pharmaceutical industry is moving away from this test as shown by global giants such as Johnson and Johnson publicly announcing that they will no longer fund or conduct this test. Three of the top ten pharmaceutical companies worldwide (in terms of revenue) have committed to no longer using the Forced Swim Test.

The public opposition to this test is huge. A petition with over 25K signatures on it was recently handed in to the New Zealand Government asking for a ban on the Forced Swim Test. A [public poll](#) conducted by Horizon indicates that this call for a ban is supported by a majority of Kiwis, with only 14% of New Zealanders supporting the continued use of the Forced Swim Test.

I think it's time that we follow the global trend and make the progressive change to commit to never conducting or funding this test again. **I would love to proudly announce the end of this test at Victoria University before the end of the month (November), to give students some positive news to end the year on.**

Please consider making this positive, bold and commendable change. Countless other students and I would love to be able to share this news widely.

Victoria University is not an institute that uses flawed and cruel research methods. We are progressive, intelligent and kind. Together we could make a change that sets us apart from all other universities in Aotearoa.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kindly,

Tamatha Paul
President
Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association

Georgia Tawharu

From: [REDACTED] on behalf of AEC Admin
Sent: Wednesday, 20 November 2019 9:40 AM
To: president@vuwsa.org.nz
Subject: RE: Correspondence from VUWSA

Dear Tamatha,

Thank you for your email and considered submission to the AEC. I have placed your letter on the agenda of the next Animal Ethics Committee meeting (on the 21st of November) for discussion. The Committee members do appreciate links to publications such as the Nature publication and HorizonPoll you have supplied and we do read them and factor them into our consideration process. If it is of interest to you, we could look to arranging a meeting between you and some representatives of the University to discuss your concerns if you felt that was of interest to you.

There is a fair amount of miss-information in the public domain regarding the Porsolt Swim Test (PST) at the moment, it is important to note that while the test is not considered useful in the study of depression, it still has limited utility in some avenues of research. The PST measures coping strategy to an acute stress and thus provides insight into the neural mechanisms of stress response. Altered response to stress, particularly chronic stress, is loosely associated with depression, but the test itself is not a model of depression and terminology that links it to 'depression like' behaviour oversimplifies the biology and misrepresents the utility of the test. In particular, the test provides meaningful data on treatments and conditions that impact the distress response such as novel pharmaceutical compounds or neuropsychiatric disorders.

It is often stated by PETA, SAFE and the NZAVS, that animals are 'nearly drowned' in the PST, but this once again miss-represents what is going on. Rats and mice are excellent swimmers and are buoyantly neutral in water. Even when expending no energy, a rodent is able to keep their nose above water by choosing to float, and can swim for extremely long distances which has been evidenced by island invasion events on predator free islands. At VUW, the few animals that have been used in the past in this test were observed through the entire procedure, so if there was an event where an animal was in danger of drowning then the investigator would intervene. There has never been an animal drowned at VUW in the PST. The test is considered a fairly mild manipulation when compared to MPIs list of impact grading examples, although to many the PST might be regarded as appearing more harmful than it is; just as another intervention (such as a sheep kept alone in a field) might appear to be less harmful than actually is.

The context of any experiment involving animals matters, as well as the alternative techniques that might reduce, refine or replace any harm that the animal may experience. These alternative techniques are explored as part of the ethical assessment process. An additional and important consideration is the extent to which the research might benefit society. More sensitive alternatives to the PST exist, but at the cost of causing more intense distress or pain to the animals involved which the AEC must consider in accordance with the principles of Reduction, Replacement, and Refinement (the 3Rs) that guide animal ethics committees in New Zealand.

The Wellington University AECs stance, which has been communicated to the NZAVS, has always been that it will consider any and all tests in the context that they are presented. Only when a procedure is fully justified and in line with the 3Rs and the research is deemed necessary will a procedure be approved, usually with additional changes requested. Because the AEC represents multiple parented organisations in the Wellington region, a decision by the AEC to refuse to consider research of this nature would by extension affect all our parented organisations as well. Ethical decisions are made according to what is the prevailing scientific consensus at the time. Scientific consensus constantly changes based on newly published data.

All animal ethics committees in New Zealand have statutory members, including Veterinarians and Animal Welfare Representatives. VUW has two vets on its committee, two members working for the RSPCA, a PGSA representative, and a community lay member. The statutory member's roles are to ask how impact on the animals can be minimised. Ethical approval at VUW is by full consensus, and would not be given if both the veterinarian's and the welfare officer on the committee had not given consent. Approval also would not have been given if the science

advisors had not agreed that the research was designed in a way that will provide meaningful and relevant results. Only a minimum number of animals to give a statistically relevant response will be exposed to a test which has been considered by an ethics committee.

Regarding the applicability of the research generated by the test. In 2017-2018 there were over a thousand journal articles incorporating data from the PST. As with any experimental technique some of the publications may draw incorrect conclusions, but the majority have added important understanding on the mechanisms of pharmaceutical agents that act on the neural networks in the brain that coordinate behavioural responses that may be impaired by neurological disorders. It is worth noting that researchers and students who have previously used the PST at VUW did not use it to develop anti-depressants.

While the test is now considered a poor one for developing new anti-depressants, we should remember that it has been used to successfully develop some of the most commonly prescribed antidepressants to treat depression, which according to the World Health Organisation will be the second leading cause of world disability by 2020. Failure of large number drugs screened through the PST to be developed into successful human medicines is not unexpected and should be looked at in a positive light in that drugs are halted before continuing to larger animal studies and clinical trials where humans would be exposed to pharmaceuticals which have been identified as having undesirable side effects or offer little improvement over existing drugs.

I hope my response provides a little bit of perspective around the way the AEC considers the test.

Yours sincerely,



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