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22 March 2004

Glenn Peterson
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Dear Glenn,

Thank you for your letter of 28th January 2004 replying to my earlier letter to President Bollinger expressing dismay at the cruel animal experimentation conducted by researchers at Columbia University. I have delayed answering, knowing that my letter carries no influence and would, nevertheless, require some time and energy to write. However, the matter has continued to weigh on me, and I have decided that, if only to get it off my chest, I must respond.

It is difficult to take your letter of reassurance seriously. I realize that in writing it you were simply doing what you are paid to do as a good public relations person for the University. This means, however, that your letter has to be a near official statement of Columbia University's policy, which ought not to go unexamined.

There are several reasons I cannot find the University's position, as stated in your letter, either serious or credible. In the first place, you assure me that the University took immediate steps "as soon as" it became aware of allegations regarding the abusive treatment of animals in its laboratories, that it launched a thorough investigation, and that this has "resulted in modifications to our animal care program." Several things in this require some analysis. The university persists in still speaking of "allegations," although these presumably turned out to be more than allegations, since, according to your letter, they induced the University to undertake "modifications" to its "animal care program." Why not say outright, "The allegations proved to have substance and we undertook the necessary modifications?" Why not reveal in your letter what the concrete modifications were, since it is now well known what the abuses were, and there is no way to judge the adequacy of the modifications without being able to compare them concretely with the abusive situation? Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the university acted "as soon as" it became aware of the abuse of the animals, since there is considerable public evidence that the University resisted facing the matter at all until its treatment of the animals became increasingly public. Even then there is evidence that the University has done everything

in its power not to remedy the situation but to dampen public awareness of it. The fact that you use the Orwellian euphemism, an “animal care program,” to describe what is patently an animal experimentation program further underscores the University’s evasiveness.

This kind of bureaucratic attempt to becloud the issue and to avoid responsibility is, as has become well-known, widespread behavior on the part of American universities. A number of studies have shown that universities almost never pursue reports of scientific research misconduct with sufficient zeal for fear of hurting their reputations and their funding. (See the 2003 work by Daniel Callahan of The Hastings Institute, What Price Better Health.) I had hoped that Columbia University would be different.

In the second place, the University’s playing on hyped-up hopes for medical cures is a common ploy of the scientific/medical community every time it gets into trouble or needs money. But it is a tactic that is wearing thin, and one that plays on some of the worst fears and hopes of people, a tactic that is unseemly at best. In this case, it is truly low-level because it is used to justify indifference, sadism, and shabby science. Knowing the university reward system, as I do, I can’t help but wonder how much of this research, and its accompanying disregard for the suffering of the animals involved, was driven primarily by the desire of the researchers to get a publishable article, come what may to the animals, or to the discovery of medical cures for that matter.

The appeal to promised medical breakthroughs by means of this kind of research is all the more reprehensible in light of mounting research which shows not only that the mistreatment of animals in medical research laboratories is extensive and severe, including in AAALAC laboratories, but, also, that the research itself is almost wholly unnecessary. It has been shown that nearly all animal medical research is useless in that it either reveals nothing not already known or that could not be known in other ways. (See, for example, Gary L. Francione, Introduction to Animal Rights, 2000).

Thank you for your response. I cannot say it has alleviated my disappointment in Columbia University. If there is more to be said that would demonstrate, and not simply assert, that Columbia has forthrightly assumed its responsibilities and taken real steps to prevent further mistreatment of animals under its aegis, I should certainly welcome learning of it.

Sincerely yours,

Douglas Sloan
Professor Emeritus of History and Education

cc. President Lee Bollinger
Professor Robert Thurman

