

Yerkes stunned by late April OSHA citation and fine

Yerkes vigorously denies all claims made by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in a citation letter issued last week. The letter indicated the agency intends to fine Yerkes \$105,300 after concluding its 19-week investigation stemming from the December death of researcher Elizabeth Griffin.

"Yerkes immediately disputed these claims and is astonished by the agency's citations," said Kate Egan, the center's chief of public affairs. Yerkes administrators plan to vigorously dispute the claims. OSHA gave the center 15 working days to respond, "but it took Yerkes only 15 minutes to fax a letter back to OSHA contesting all claims and announcing the University's intention to fight the charges as necessary," Egan said.

National news coverage surrounded Griffin's death from herpes B, which occurred six weeks after what she considered to be a minor eye exposure while working with rhesus monkeys at the Lawrenceville Field Station. "We are surprised [OSHA has] chosen to ignore the facts. And we are dismayed that the investigation appears to have been shaped by media coverage," Tom Gordon, Yerkes' associate director of scientific programs, told The Atlanta Journal/ Constitution.

Yerkes states that it has always been in compliance with applicable safety guidelines. Nevertheless, after Griffin's exposure, the primate center immediately required employees to use protective eyewear in all animal areas at all times, even in situations in which the risk of herpes B exposure was remote, Egan said.

Yerkes Director Tom Insel and Gordon met with employees as soon as they received the letter to review the citations and answer questions. The citation and Yerkes' response are both posted at the center. "This whole issue is complex," Gordon said. "There is nothing clean and simple about this. Individuals are exposed despite the best efforts of everyone involved." Indeed, after Griffin's death, one Yerkes worker received splashes to the eye that seeped in through the edges of her goggles.

Yerkes and Emory administrators remain firm in their assertion that Yerkes not only conformed to all the current standards of safety and protection at the time of the incident, but had been an active participant in creating those standards.

The guidelines adopted by the rest of the industry-primate centers, pharmaceutical companies, zoos, primate sanctuaries-were drafted at workshops convened by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and held in collaboration with Emory/Yerkes faculty. These guidelines, which established the recommended safety practices and personal protective equipment worn by employees, reflected the state of scientific knowledge at the time.

"OSHA's failure to recognize this and to ignore the voluminous evidence presented resulted in citations unwarranted by the facts, the scientific knowledge or safety standards followed by other primate facilities," Yerkes said in a statement.

"This tragic incident could have occurred at any primate facility," said Peter Gerone, director of the Tulane Primate Center and dean of the primate center directors. "We all used similar procedures and, with respect to eye protection, all have modified practices in the aftermath of the death at Yerkes."

Gordon likened risk of monkey bites and scratches to other risks health care workers face in doing their jobs. "Whenever you work around animals or people with infectious tissues or biological fluids, you take risks," he said in the same AJC article. "The job of institutions is to minimize the risk. But you can never get down to zero. That's as silly as saying a health care worker should never get a needle stick. It might be good in theory, but in practice that just can't be the case."

At the time of Griffin's infection there had been fewer than 40 human cases of herpes B, and in Yerkes' 68-year history, none of its employees had ever contracted the virus or even suffered serious injury from any of its primates. "The infection of the employee at Yerkes was the first documented case of infection via [eye] exposure, and consequently changed our knowledge of the virus and routes of exposure," said David Davenport, a leading clinical expert in the treatment of herpes B.

To underscore their commitment to workplace safety, Yerkes has accelerated its ongoing development of a herpes B-free monkey colony. This costly and labor-intensive project was started in 1991 to further reduce risk to workers. It's expected to take at least a decade, but funds have been committed to speed the timetable as much as possible.

The center also plans to make development of a herpes B vaccine for monkeys a priority in the new vaccine program, Egan said.

-Stacey Jones

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