



November 5, 2007

Joseph Robertson, Jr., M.D., M.B.A.
President
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Dear Dr. Robertson:

I am writing to ask of you a difficult thing: that you, as president of OHSU, look honestly – long and hard – at the nicotine experiments being conducted by Eliot Spindel on primates and their infants, and that you forego the federal money that flows into your university from this grant and others that use animals in tobacco-related experiments.

As a physician, you know that smoking is harmful to humans and you are most likely horrified by the prospect of women smoking during their pregnancies. As a practical matter, I'm sure we can agree that some people will never quit smoking regardless of the consequences to them or their unborn children. I believe that you and I would also agree that resources for public health programs are scarce and that our focus must be on prevention efforts so that we diminish the chance that our youth will take up cigarettes. It is much more difficult to get an addicted person to see the error of their ways than it is to give non-addicted people the tools and training necessary to prevent an addiction. With prevention we naturally decrease harm to fetal development from nicotine and other addictive substances.

Eliot Spindel's experiments that look at fetal lung development in monkeys born to nicotine-dosed mothers have been conducted for years, and are scheduled to continue until 2012 – and to what end? Spindel's justification for manipulating and cutting up these animals is always the same – pregnant women smoke, so the mechanism of harm to the lungs must be determined in order to prevent that harm. Suppose the mechanism is pinned down and there is a substance that can mitigate the harm? How then are we to ensure that pregnant women, who smoke, take that treatment, whether it is Vitamin C or some costly drug that would likely have its own side-effects? Where does this irrational effort end?

There are many good organizations, like Campaign for Tobacco-free Kids, devoted to smoking cessation, education, and prevention, and they deserve the funding that is now wasted on projects such as Spindel's. My organization has as its primary concern the suffering of the animals used in such experiments but I also love and respect children and others who are harmed by the effects of smoking.

OHSU should feel some collective guilt over wasting scarce resources on amorphous projects such as Spindel's, when those funds could be reallocated to school programs that will actually prevent infant health problems caused by nicotine. Prevention can cause a reduction in infant suffering far more quickly than can Spindel's decades-long basic research which may, in fact, be misleading because of something as simple as species differences and the ubiquitous extrapolation problems associated with animal experiments. If we are serious about moving toward a smoke-free society we must be pragmatic and we must be honorable in the methods used to go forward. There is nothing more dishonorable than taking funds from the federal government and from tobacco companies to figure out how people might be allowed to indulge in harmful habits when those habits can be broken.

OHSU can set itself apart from the crowd by breaking its own bad habit of accepting monies that it knows are ill-spent. I would be happy to meet with you about this issue and hope you will contact me at 415-388-9641 to arrange for that to happen.

Sincerely,

Elliot Katz, DVM
President



cc: Elizabeth G. Nabel, M.D.
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