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VA to Conduct In-depth Internal Review of Existing Canine Research Projects

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the Office of Research and Development (ORD) of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) extended its commitment to reduce future research on canines by initiating a rapid, in-depth internal review of existing canine research projects.

An external group will review these recommendations and provide VA with guiding principles for future canine research to assure benefits to Veterans.

“We understand that this is a sensitive issue,” said VA Secretary David Shulkin, “We look forward to a time when research involving canines is no longer necessary to advance the health of our Veterans and are taking action to hasten that day, but until then, the agency has a duty to do everything in its power to develop new treatments to preserve and restore our Veterans’ health.”

Animal research at VA is strictly controlled and monitored with accountability mechanisms in place that comply with the same regulations and standards that university programs, state, private and military organizations use. In the past 20 years, VA use of canines in research has been reduced significantly and continues to be reduced, as much as possible. It is important to note that of thousands of VA research projects, fewer than 15 currently involve canines.

VA has always required medical relevance and justification for canine use, and in late 2017, VA instituted a policy that no new canine research would begin without approval of both, the Chief Research and Development Officer and the VA Secretary. As a result, new canine studies have not been initiated, and two new studies were required to use alternative models instead of canines. VA is now reviewing existing studies using canines to determine whether the use of canines in these studies should be phased out in advance of their original end dates.

In addition, when canines are the only viable models, VA is proactively contacting the principal investigators leading these studies, requesting they develop plans to establish alternative models. VA intends to fund development of canine alternatives, which will reduce the need for canine research within VA.

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