A Story of the Best of Intentions

Our cast of characters:

Dr. Newby, assistant professor at Great Big U, has a breeding colony of mice with special phenotypes that he studies

Joe, GBU Animal Care Technician

The Dean of Research at GBU

Dr. Fresch, Hometown VAMC investigator, studies the behavior of mice running a special maze that he designed

Becky, Hometown VAMC VMU Technician

The Hometown VAMC Director

An eager young reporter

The story:

Dr. Newby was really excited about having just gotten his first NIH research grant! It was for a study of how performance is impacted by stress, which he planned to study by observing how well mice do in a maze, comparing those that have to work their way through the maze right after being transported across town, with those that get 3 days to acclimate to their new surroundings after being transported, before they have to deal with the maze. Dr. Newby had a breeding colony of mice at Great Big U, with specific phenotypes that he believes will help to demonstrate the mechanisms underlying the effects of stress on performance. His friend, Dr. Fresch, had recently gotten an appointment at the local VA, Hometown VAMC, and had already set up a maze in the animal facility at the VA for his own studies. Dr. Fresch was very enthusiastic about letting Dr. Newby run some mice through his maze.

Dr. Newby carefully prepared his protocol for review by the IACUC at Great Big U. He explained in the protocol that he needed to time the transportation of the mice to the VA so that they could be tested in the maze immediately on arrival. Because it’s hard to arrange timing like that with the animal transport services of the University’s lab animal department, he asked to transport the mice in his own car, and he explained how he would keep the animals secure and comfortable in their cages, ensure that the transportation would be discrete, and avoid contaminating either his car or the animal cages. The IACUC reviewed the protocol, asked for some clarifications, and then approved it.

Dr. Fresch had worked with the Great Big U IACUC in the past, because it also reviews protocols for the VA, and he knew that that IACUC is meticulous about making sure that everything is the way it should be, before it grants approval. So he heartily congratulated Dr. Newby when the approval was granted, and the two of them set about scheduling the experiments.

On September 2, Dr. Newby transported the first set of 12 mice from the University over to the VA. He and Dr. Fresch studied 6 of the mice in the maze, and put the other 6 in cages, carefully labeled to show that they are part of Dr. Newby’s NIH-sponsored study at the U, and providing contact information for both Dr. Newby and Dr. Fresch. This turned out to be good thing later, when Joe, a member of the husbandry staff at the VA, noticed the new cages and called Dr. Fresch to check on whether there were any special husbandry instructions. Dr. Fresch assured him that the animals on the NIH study belong to the U, so animal care technicians from the U would be coming over to the VA to provide the husbandry according to the SOPs at the U. Unfortunately, Dr. Newby had assured the animal facility personnel at the U that husbandry would be provided by the very competent VA staff members while the animals were on VA property, so there would be no need for animal care technicians from the U to worry about the offsite animals.

On September 3, as Dr. Newby was loading his car with the next 12 mice to go to the VA, he happened to be observed by an eager young reporter who thinks animal research is fascinating and thought it would be great to write something about the wonderful work being done locally. He didn’t want to bother the busy investigators, and he had just participated in a workshop about accessing information through open records requests, so he went off to see what he could learn through an open records request about animal research at Great Big U.

After Dr. Newby and Dr. Fresch finished studying the 6 new “immediate mice” on September 3, and got the 6 new “acclimation” mice settled in their new cages, Dr. Newby looked in on the 6 mice that he had brought over the day before and were now completing Day 1 of their acclimation period. He was surprised to see that it didn’t look like they had gotten any fresh food or water since he had left them. He didn’t see any of the VA animal care personnel as he was leaving, so, as soon as he returned to the University, he mentioned to Becky, who helps him with his breeding colony at GBU, that there seemed to have been some sort of mix-up. Becky immediately offered to go over to the VA and take care of the Newby mice. Unbeknownst to Dr. Newby and Becky though, Joe had stopped in to check on the Newby mice shortly after Dr. Newby left, because he wanted to make sure that they had been cared for. As it didn’t look like they had, he went off to find out what the protocol said about any special husbandry these mice needed. While he was gone, Becky arrived, fed and watered the mice, and left again. When Joe then returned to the mouse room to get Dr. Fresch’s phone number, because he couldn’t find the protocol, he was puzzled to see that the mice now had fresh food and full water bottles. Joe got even more confused when Dr. Fresch said that he didn’t have a copy of the protocol, because it was approved by the GBU IACUC.

When the state open records request reached Great Big U, the IACUC, the veterinarian, the animal facility supervisor, and the IACUC administrator there worked closely with the University’s public affairs department to respond promptly in compliance with the open records requirements. The VAMC Director was then blindsided a few weeks later when he was asked during a press conference about the opening of a new VA clinic in town, for his response to the article about the collaboration of the VA and GBU in animal research, which was published that morning, but he had not yet seen. When he mentioned this to his friend, the Dean of Research at the University, the Dean looked into it and learned that the people who had worked on the response had hoped to spare the VAMC the bother, especially as state open records requirements don’t apply to the VA anyway.