

IACUC Training Exercise #1 – 2022 (Semiannual Evaluations – Facility Inspection)



The following exercise, the first in a series of four focused on semiannual evaluations, may be useful in stimulating discussion regarding compliance with PHS Policy and VA Handbook 1200.07. To facilitate discussion, page 1 of the exercise may be distributed to the IACUC members prior to a meeting. After the IACUC discusses the question during the meeting, the second page may be distributed for the committee's further consideration.

It was time (again!) for the IACUC to conduct the semiannual evaluation of the program and facilities for the animal research program of the Hometown VA Medical Facility. Ted Bramble, the Non-Scientific Member, and Dr. Cheryl Spring, one of the Scientist Members, went early one afternoon to inspect some of the rooms in the animal facility. In one of the rat housing rooms, Ted noticed some bedding on the floor near the animal transfer station. He noted it on his checklist as a minor deficiency. They mentioned this to Jerry, one of the animal technicians whom they saw in the hallway, and he went right away to sweep it up. Later, when they opened the door to another rodent housing room, they were hit with a blast of hot air. Dr. Spring was aghast at this, as she knew how sensitive rodents can be to overheating. Fortunately, they didn't see any animals in the room at the time. They could tell though that the temperature must have been high for some time, as the surfaces in the room felt warm as well. Dr. Spring said that the elevated temperature, which apparently did not trigger any alarms for anyone to do something about it, was clearly a risk to the health and welfare of animals. They were just lucky that it had happened in a room with no animals. She marked on her checklist as significant deficiencies both the elevated temperature, and the failure of the temperature monitoring system, and she made a note for herself to alert the VMU Supervisor, Autumn, to the problem.

For IACUC discussion: What scenarios can you think of, in which the bedding on the floor should actually have been addressed as a significant deficiency? What scenarios can you think of, in which the overheated room actually should have been addressed as a minor deficiency, or not a deficiency at all?

Here are some possible scenarios that would make Ted and Dr. Spring think differently about their observations:

As Jerry went to get the broom to sweep up the bedding, he wondered to himself what was going on, as he was sure he had just swept that room first thing that morning, right after he had changed the cages. In fact, it occurred to him that this had been happening regularly lately, when he would return to the room several hours or overnight after sweeping up, and find more bedding on the floor. When he went into the room, he saw the bedding right where he expected it. Taking a closer look, he realized that it didn't look quite the same as the bedding in the rat cages. Glancing up, Jerry noticed that the cover plate on the electrical outlet nearby, which the animal transfer station was plugged into, was loose. He tapped on the side of the cover plate, to see how loose it was, and was surprised by some more bedding falling out onto the floor. Jerry found a screwdriver and removed the cover plate. To his surprise, he found that mice had made a small nest next to the electrical outlet box between the studs behind the Sheetrock wall of the rat room. The nest was empty at the time, so Jerry couldn't tell whether the resident was a wild house mouse or a laboratory mouse. Regardless, any unidentified mouse is a potential risk to the health and welfare of the rats in the room, and even the animals and personnel throughout the animal facility. Jerry immediately reported his findings to Autumn, the VMU Supervisor; she arranged for the pest control company contracted by the Hometown VAMC to investigate and remedy the rodent problem.

Autumn, the VMU Supervisor, was in the rat room with Jerry when Dr. Spring stopped by Autumn's office later, so Dr. Spring left her a note about the overheated room. Autumn saw that the room identified in Dr. Spring's note was one all the animals had been moved out of a couple of days ago. Facilities Management had notified her that they were replacing ductwork in the zone that served this room and a large equipment storage room, so they had taken the Building Management System for this zone off-line, and the real time temperature was not being monitored. Autumn immediately called Facilities Management (FM) to let them know that the empty room was unusually warm, even hot, and placed a work order; she was assured that Facilities Management would send a HVAC technician shortly.