August 18, 2015

The Honorable Ashton Carter
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Secretary Carter,

We write to you on behalf of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), a 501(c)(3) educational and advocacy organization dedicated to advancing reason and science in public affairs, as well as the separation of church and state. Our organization represents tens of thousands of individuals across the United States.

CFI is deeply troubled by an August 12, 2015 investigation by journalist Brandy Zadrozny, published by The Daily Beast, titled, "U.S. Pays for Scientology 'Experiment' on Sick Veterans."\(^1\) The report revealed that the Department of Defense (DoD) has, since 2009, paid $633,677 to fund the experimental study\(^2\) of a detoxification method, "Purif," invented by the founder of the Church of Scientology and long-advocated for by his church, as a possible treatment for Gulf War Syndrome (GWS). The study is being conducted by the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY Albany).

As part of its broad mission, CFI advocates for the application of logic and the scientific method to both religious and pseudoscientific claims. Scientology’s Purif is a rare concept that falls within both realms. As the article indicates, the lead researcher here, David O. Carpenter, is not new to research involving pseudoscience, listing research interests including ‘electromagnetic sensitivity,’ the heretofore wholly unsubstantiated idea that power lines and cell phones are making people sick.

However, such investigations — especially when conducted with public money by our shared public institutions — must be held accountable both to reason and to standard, prudential re-

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search practices. As such, CFI finds it deeply troubling that DoD would see fit to spend hundreds of thousands of public dollars pursuing a suite of pseudoscientific ideas concocted decades ago by a religious leader who held no medical or scientific training whatsoever. This “treatment” is not advocated by any medical or scientific organization, but instead only by the Church of Scientology, a group considered by many observers to fit the definition of a cult. Within Scientology, the purpose of Purif is clear: It is not so much a ‘treatment,’ as a means of enticing new members into the religion. One former church member even told the journalist:

"Purif programs are regarded inside the church as prime recruiting grounds, and are known as an entrance point into Scientology."

CFI thus questions exactly who is the prime beneficiary of this pseudoscientific research: the suffering veteran or the Church of Scientology?

The Department of Defense is therefore allocating taxpayer money to a religiously based program when it funds this research. Public money, which is intended to be spent on improving the well-being of veterans suffering from Gulf War Syndrome, is instead being spent on promoting and furthering the goals of the Church of Scientology. This is a clear violation of the First Amendment guarantee of separation of church and state contained in the Establishment Clause, and, for that reason alone, must be stopped. Moreover, based on the revelations in this article, the study is poorly constructed, riddled with conflicts of interest with the Church of Scientology, and presents significant and well-known health risks to already-suffering veterans. Over and above the constitutional violation, CFI therefore urges that this study be halted immediately, and an investigation launched into how it was ever approved.

Unnecessary Risk, Poor Design, and Lack of Scientific Rigor

Known as the "Purification Rundown" or "Purif", the pseudoscientific ‘treatment’ was developed in the 1970s by Church of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, a man with no training whatsoever in science or medicine. The program, promoted by the Church to "help to remove biochemical factors inhibiting your spiritual freedom," consists of exercise, hours-long overexposure to saunas, and massive doses of vitamins, which at such quantities present the risk of significant side effects, such as "hot, flushed, and prickly skin, chills, upset stomach, headache, dizziness, and blurred vision." Tellingly, as the article explains, the manifestation of those specific side effects is claimed to be proof that "detoxification" is occurring, not simply just an overdose of those specific vitamins.

As stated in the article, overexposure to saunas is known to present significant risks to patients. Also, while some sources suggest limited "sweat" benefits of such exposure, these benefits are not claimed by any reputable medical sources to apply to any of the chemicals possibly related to GWS. The supposed treatment brings known risks, and has no counterbalancing benefits. However, the faults of this study run significantly deeper. Its flawed design is compounded by the stunning fact that in this study, the vitamin supplements are dosed and administered to patients
by assistants who hold no medical or scientific training. This study is not a medical one, performed by trained medical personnel. Instead it is a study of a religious and pseudoscientific technique, performed at the expense of already suffering veterans.

In keeping with the Church of Scientology's well-known dogmatic rejection of psychiatry, Purif requires patients cease the use of many psychiatric medications, "including those for pain, seizures, and mood disorders." This restriction is likewise imposed on participants in this publicly funded study, who are required to cease using these prescribed medications. As the Daily Beast article states, this mimics the dangerous practices of Narconon, the Church of Scientology's Purif-based substance abuse program, which:

"...has been criticized for failing to employ proper medical personnel and using Hubbard's techniques instead of proven drug-treatment therapies, practices that have been blamed for a string of recent deaths inside Narconon facilities across the country and caused the organization to settle several wrongful-death lawsuits in recent years."

Requiring these veterans — many of whom suffer from depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other ailments — to cease taking psychiatric medications presents severe and unnecessary risks to them. That this is being asked of them in service to a religion's unscientific dogma highlights CFI's significant concerns about the safety and ethical structure of this study.

Lastly, for all its work, the study as structured does not even include testing and comparing the blood samples taken from patients before and after "treatment," even though lead investigator Carpenter admits that doing so would be "really the ultimate test of whether this thing does what it says."

Conflicts of Interest

According to the article, the International Academy of Detoxification Specialists (IADS), a Scientology-related group created in 1994 to promote Purif, donated $20,000 to SUNY Albany in 2006 precisely for the study of "detoxification program research." Likewise, the treatment itself is being provided by Severna Park Health and Wellness Center, a Scientology-affiliated organization, and at a lucrative cost of $2,000 per patient.

The vitamin supplements used in the treatment are purchased from Dr. Stephan Price, a prominent Scientologist who reportedly worked as the personal chiropractor for current Church of Scientology leader David Miscavige. And again, the supplements are dosed and administered to patients by untrained assistants, including in one case a "man named Joe" who, along with holding no appropriate medical training, happens to be a "die-hard Scientologist."

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The co-investigator in this study is Kathleen Kerr, an outspoken Scientologist who has done advocacy work on behalf of the Church and served for years on the Narconon Toronto board of directors. Thus, along with those persons and groups mentioned above, she holds an obvious and damning vested interest in seeing the Church of Scientology's Purif method proven effective. Shockingly, David Carpenter, the study's own lead investigator, was unaware of Kerr's conflict of interest until informed of its existence by Zadrozny, the Daily Beast journalist.

Overall, as former church members speculated in this report, even if Purif is proven to fail, it is highly likely that this study — and its Department of Defense and SUNY Albany imprimatur — will still be used by the Church of Scientology in further attempts to validate Hubbard's pseudoscientific/religious regimen. In fact, according to this report those efforts have already begun: one patient was provided airfare home from the study by a Church member, who she claims then approached her "about contributing to a book on the Hubbard method."

Zadrozny also tellingly quotes Scientologist Keith Miller, President of the Foundation for Advancements in Science and Education (FASE), an IADS-related organization founded by Scientologists in 1981 to "validate" Hubbard's various ideas and gain "government subsidies and insurance coverage for detox programs":

"Dr. Carpenter is one of the most respected people in the field of environmental health. It's quite an insult to imply that he would allow his findings to be slanted."

Conclusion

Veterans suffering from Gulf War Syndrome have been struggling for decades to find effective treatments, and they deserve support and assistance from the government. However, spending public money to use these sick veterans as guinea pigs to test a pseudoscientific/religious practice is disturbing—especially a practice used by that very church as a recruiting "entrance point." Put plainly, public dollars at a public institution are being used in an attempt to validate a religious ritual which serves to recruit vulnerable individuals into the Church of Scientology. For these reasons, this study violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution, and CFI demands all public funding be terminated.

To make matters worse, submitting these veterans to a dangerous, poor-quality study riddled with conflicts of interest and structurally biased in favor of the Church of Scientology is obscene, and does absolutely nothing to address their plight. These desperate veterans deserve far better from their government. As it stands, this publicly funded misadventure advances the sectarian interests of the Church of Scientology, not the health and wellbeing of sick veterans.

Given the facts exposed in this article, CFI strongly urges the Department of Defense to immediately halt this study and open an investigation into how it ever came about. The American people who have paid for this fiasco, the hundreds of desperate veterans who have suffered and been
manipulated through it, and the hundreds of thousands of sick veterans desperately waiting for medically sound, scientific treatments for Gulf War Syndrome deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

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