

Anatomy of a Runaround

University of Arizona Fires Researcher who Planned Study of Cannabis as a Treatment for Vets With PTSD

Suzanne Sisley, MD —who everyone calls “Sue” and whose performance evaluations had always been favorable— was notified by the University of Arizona June 30 that her employment as clinical assistant professor of psychology would be terminated in September.

Sisley had gotten most of the approvals necessary to conduct a study of cannabis as a treatment for military veterans dealing with PTSD. Details of Sisley’s intended study are at lower right.

This interview was conducted July 15. A few days earlier, Sisley had discussed her firing in an interview with Sanjay Gupta, MD, on CNN. Gupta treated her with total respect and she left the studio feeling relieved.

SUZANNE SISLEY: ... I made about 500 new Facebook friends that day. Scientists from all over the world sent me messages saying, “We know exactly what you’re dealing with,” and “Please don’t give up this project, this is for all of us, we want you to win!”

Most people can’t afford to do this. I’m ruining any potential career in academia for sure, but... I’m a doctor, I’m taking care of patients every day [in private practice in Scottsdale, Arizona].

O’SHAUGHNESSY’S: It’s fortunate to have another way to make a living... Help me get the chronology straight. As of mid-March you were telling the *LA Times*, “This is a great day.”

Traditionally, the Public Health Service is the bottleneck that nobody emerges from.

SISLEY: The Public Health Service had just issued a letter of approval. That felt like the biggest battle of my life. Traditionally, the Public Health Service is the bottleneck that nobody emerges from. They don’t have any timeline to respond, so they can take 10 years. That’s where research traditionally has gotten stalled. So it was a real shift for the Public Health Service to approve efficacy research on whole-plant marijuana.

But it didn’t change the fact that marijuana is subject to more approvals... I could never get a DEA Schedule One license. I applied for it a year ago but the university refused to find us a location. And without a location, the DEA can’t come in and inspect our safe and give us a Schedule One approval.

And then you still have to finalize the IRB application.

Normally if you have a supportive university—a university that actually valued this work—then they would find you a space. All we needed was an office with a ventilation system. Nothing special or fancy, really.

O’S: When did you realize the university was dragging its heels?

SISLEY: That’s a good question. We got an initial IRB approval based on the study design, back in October 2012. [Hospitals rely on Institutional Review Boards to assess whether research proposals meet scientific and ethical standards.]

That was already a wonderful victory because university IRB approval is very hard to obtain. That’s a very high bar. And I think it hastened our FDA approval. Anyway, I went to the university administra-

tion and said “Hey, this is great news. I’m ready, can we get a space and get going?”

O’S: Who in the administration did you see?

SISLEY: We talked to the dean, the vice president, the health office, the folks at the high levels who had the capacity to identify space. Their first response was “Oh, no... You can’t do marijuana research, that’s illegal. It’s illegal to do marijuana research on university campuses, don’t you know about the Federal Controlled Substances Act?”

So I had a long interchange with the university lawyers—primarily on the phone, so there’s nothing documented—but we went back and forth and they said, “It’s illegal, you can’t do that.”

I kept trying to explain that federal law supersedes state law, but they didn’t care. They basically said, “We’re not going to accommodate this unless you run a bill through the legislature that proves that this is legal.” And I just thought, “you have got to be kidding me.”

Fortunately, the Arizona Medical Association led the fight for a research bill. U of A was a reluctant partner. This is what’s so funny: if you call the university for their public statement, what they say is “Of course we’re supportive of marijuana research. We championed the bill that enabled marijuana research to be legal on university campuses.”

Of course there never was any need for such a bill in the first place.

O’S: Just another hurdle they made you jump over. Another delay.

SISLEY: They didn’t want to push for the bill. I dragged them kicking and screaming to the legislature, telling them, “Hey, this is what you asked for, why aren’t you getting involved? Here’s a hearing, go testify.”

Ultimately the bill passed unanimously through both houses and the senate, because every legislator, even those who were anti-marijuana knew this was just a reaffirmation of existing law. It was a stupid waste of time that the university lawyers constructed to create another absurd barrier. And they were successful! They delayed the study another year with that bill.

They can say what they want about their support for marijuana research, but their inaction shows where their heart really is. They never could accept the optics of having veterans vaporizing and smoking marijuana on their campus.

O’S: And they still wouldn’t assign you a location?

SISLEY: Even after we succeeded in getting the bill signed by the governor, the university still refused to identify a site. And here we are, almost two years since our IRB approval, and I still have no spot to do this work.

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That’s one of the mandated aspects: the FDA requires that we conduct four-hour safety sessions on campus, where veterans would both smoke and vaporize marijuana. We’d be monitoring them for adverse ef-

fects, because many of the participants would be naïve to marijuana, we wanted to make sure that if they had a panic attack or a psychotic episode they’d be safe medically.

Additionally, it’s important to make sure they are taught the proper delivery method so they can adhere to a standard delivery protocol. A lot of these guys haven’t used a vaporizer, so we’ll have to train them how to use the Volcano, how to do it in a standardized way.

Same with smoking. We would use the four-hour session on campus to teach the delivery protocols.

“We can’t have veterans interacting with our medical students, that sounds dangerous.”

I gave the administrators about 10 different options—office space that I knew had been lying fallow—taxpayer-supported space, just sitting there, nobody was using it! And I said, how about this, how about that, and all of them were rejected, because, “Oh, we can’t have that near the dean’s office!”

O’S: If this wasn’t a tragedy that would be very funny.”

SISLEY: There’s a basement beneath the dean’s office with space that nobody was using, and they were like, “Oh, no, we can’t have that under the dean’s office, because imagine what people would think!” That’s literally what they said, it was awesome.

And there were other things: “We can’t have veterans interacting with our medical



LOCATION ON OUTSKIRTS OF CAMPUS (light-colored building at left) was belatedly proposed by University of Arizona administrators as a site where veterans could use marijuana in a clinical trial to assess its effect on PTSD symptoms.

students, that sounds dangerous.”

O’S: Really? Who said that?

SISLEY: Really! All the administrators were trying to come up with excuses. When the media spotlight came down on them so hard in April, after the Public Health Service letter, they were panicking. We’d been covered by probably about 300 media outlets.

The reporters would call me and ask, “Why aren’t you moving forward?” And I’d say, “It’s because, unfortunately, the U of A doesn’t care about finding a location for this work, even a year and a half later. So, sadly, we are stymied. The University knows that the forward progress of the study is hinging on them finding a location and they refuse to do so, a year and a half later.”

So then they run to the administration and they say, “Sisley says you’re not letting her.” And suddenly they have this emergency meeting of all of the relevant department heads—the IRB committee, the Office of Controlled Substances, and they all get together on a conference call

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Sisley’s Intended Study

Sue Sisley, MD, designed and got FDA approval in April, 2011 to conduct an “Investigation of the Safety and Efficacy of Medical Marijuana in Veterans with Chronic, Treatment-Resistant Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.”

Such a study is called for, according to Sisley, because “PTSD plagues between six and 10% of the US population at some point during their lifetime. A significant percentage of PTSD patients fail to respond adequately to FDA-approved treatments such as Zoloft and Paxil—suggesting a need to develop innovative treatments.”

A new treatment would be especially timely, she notes, because one in five soldiers returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan will have PTSD.

The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies raised \$10,000 to support Sisley’s project and intends to raise more. Her plan is to enroll 50 veterans with “PTSD arising from their service in the US armed forces” and to assess their responses to marijuana of varying potency, including one CBD-rich strain. Participants will be men and women 18 or older with a diagnosis of PTSD that has not improved after medication or psychotherapy.

The investigation Sisley proposes seems small, simple, and short-term.

In the first stage (four weeks) groups of 10 patients each will use marijuana of varying potencies—0% THC, 2% THC, 6% THC, 12% THC, and 6% THC plus 6% CBD. Their daily dose will be 1.8 grams. Within each group, half will smoke pre-rolled cigarettes, half will vaporize.

In the second stage (also four weeks), to begin after two weeks of abstinence, participants will be divided into three groups—20 using 6% THC, 10 using 12% THC, and 20 using the CBD-THC combo. In each group, again, half will smoke and half will vaporize the 1.8 gram daily dose.

Perceived effects will be reported by subjects to the investigators daily by phone during the first week of each stage, and at weekly meetings.

CBD in the mix

Sisley puts forth three hypotheses:

- “Marijuana will ease the symptoms of PTSD, specifically reducing nightmares, improving sleep, and improving mood as measured by the Clinician Administered PTSD scale (CAPS)” and other evaluation methods.

- “Marijuana, in a dose dependent manner, will ease the symptoms of PTSD.

- “Marijuana with 6% THC and 6% CBD will be more effective than marijuana with 6% THC alone.”

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and pretend they're all supportive. They're all, "Hey, we want to help."

And one of the first things they brought up was, "We can't have veterans with PTSD on campus, that sounds like a ticking time bomb."

Finally they found a location on the outskirts of the campus and they said, "This is something we feel comfortable with, why don't you go look at it?" So I toured it with someone from facilities-management and...

He said that there's asbestos all through the floors and the ceiling, it need extensive work —not to mention electricity. I asked him, "Who's going to pay for this?" He said, "Not U of A, we don't have any money."

The university made no commitment to pay for the work that had to be done, and they never gave us a timeline of when they were going to actually do it or when we could move in.

But they could tell the media, "We found her a perfectly good space, what is she whining about?"

O'S: In your correspondence with a veterans' group you said the university was bowing to pressure from a politician named Driggs. Who is he?

SISLEY: Adam Driggs is a very powerful, hyper-conservative right winger, who owes his position as President of the State Senate to a deciding vote from Kimberly Yee, so he's forever indebted to her. A veterans' group tried to get her recalled because she blocked the bill that would have enabled our research. Driggs started attacking me because he thought I was the perpetrator of this recall.

O'S: And the vets merely dupes —how contemptuous! Who was behind the recall and what was it about?

SISLEY: There was a committee of veterans called AVAC, the Arizona Veterans Assistance Committee. The chair, Ricardo Pareda, is a good guy, a U of A alum. I think he viewed it as, "How can a single person, a single legislator, halt the entire democratic process?" He felt that the bill should at least deserve a hearing, and he didn't realize that in this political environment, a chairman can simply refuse to hear a bill, even if it's been passed almost unanimously in the House of Representatives. It comes over to the Senate and the rules over in our legislature say that if a bill is not heard in committee, it dies. It won't ever get on the floor in the Senate.

O'S: I saw a reference in your correspondence to being a lifelong Republican.

SISLEY: That's true, I am. That's what's so funny about me calling these people right-wing. Because I'm right-wing, but I'm not...

O'S: What do you mean by "right-wing" in your own case?

SISLEY: I'm fiscally conservative but I'm socially libertarian. And from my perspective, that's what a good Republican is: socially libertarian. Don't waste taxpayer dollars continuing this prohibition.

Unfortunately, the right-wing lawmakers in Arizona are puritanical. Our county attorney claimed that tinctures were illegal. Winning those cases took two years.

O'S: What's his name?

SISLEY: Bill Montgomery. He debated Jack Cole of LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition) at the state bar, and he lost miserably. Jack just trounced him. I came up to him afterwards and said, "You know this is really sad to me, that you keep claiming that you support marijuana research, but your own group, the Arizona Prosecuting Attorney's Association keeps denouncing marijuana research, testifying against our bill."

And he says, "Oh Sue, that's not me, that's APAC!" But I said, "Everybody knows you control APAC. And yet you're

telling the lawyers at the Bar that you love marijuana research. You're just talking out of both sides of your mouth."

He was just furious, because nobody ever stands up to him. He's a complete steamroller, but I said, "You need to know that the medical community is lining up behind the legalization effort. I think we're all sick of this giant waste of taxpayer dollars and we need to regulate the system."

O'S: They know which leaders pose a real threat and who will play ball with them. In California they knew to pick off Dennis Peron and Tod Mikuriya. You're in good company.

SISLEY: I'd forgotten he said I was the ringleader behind this. I think they're scared by veteran activism in Arizona. We have a thousand vets statewide and very few of them come out of the shadows and act politically. They were galvanized around this bill during the legislative session and it just scared the shit out of these politicians.

All they want to do with the vets is to have them seen but not heard. They don't really want to do anything for them besides just talk about how much they care about the vets.

O'S: Believe me, I understand.

SISLEY: Bill Montgomery is on the ballot in 2016 for reelection at the same time that Arizona will have a tax to regulate that initiative. We're already raising money for that and it'll definitely be on the ballot...

The bottom line is, Senate President Driggs controls the university budget. He says that he doesn't. If you interview him he'll tell you, "I don't have that much power, I have one vote!" But we all know that he's the puppet master.

He was furious at U of A for hosting this research, he's furious. He tried to sneak in an amendment during the 11th hour saying that no university resources will ever go to supporting marijuana research. DID HE SUCCEED?

Actually, he's still furious that medical marijuana passed in Arizona. He took out his resentment on the voters, on me and my research, on U of A, on their budget. Everyone else got a giant increase in WHAT YEAR, but the U of A just got level funding, and it was blamed it on this, the marijuana research. So the university decided to switch gears and get rid of the one person who could have implemented the work.

The latest twist is —because they got all this really damaging fallout from the media— they went behind my back, and met with my sponsor on the phone,

The told Rick Doblin (of MAPS, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies), "Hey we love marijuana research. We don't want to work with Dr. Sisley, but we really want to do this work. So if you're willing to let us offer you another P.I. [principal investigator] we will move forward."

Rick basically said "You reinstate Dr. Sisley or we'll be taking this research somewhere else."

He sent them a letter stating our position, but apparently it wasn't clear enough, because they said, "Thank you so much for your support, we will be sending the name of another P.I."

O'S: That's pretty funny, too.

SISLEY: They just totally ignored it. And I understand they came out with a press release based on that phone call to Rick, where they said "MAPS has agreed to work with us on finding another P.I." And Rick sent them another letter repeating what he had said.

O'S: It seems like nowadays people can just tell the media anything that they want. Disconnected to the truth. The opposite of the truth.

SISLEY: It is amazing. I think it really upset Rick, who was trying to be diplo-

matic, and I told him, "Rick, enough with the flowery language, the kind words. Just send them a note that says loud and clear that the research would not exist if not for Dr. Sisley, and we are not implementing this work at U of A, unless you reinstate her. That's it."

So MAPS sent out a second letter, reiterating the first letter in more clear tones, and the university still said, "We'll be sending you another P.I." This way they cover themselves politically with the veterans and the marijuana community by saying, "Hey, we're not opposed to this, we'll work with MAPS."