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Accidental death of rat colony sends 20 years of research down the drain

University of Montana--Missoula. Office of University Relations

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ryan
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ordinarily, the death of a dozen rats is an event to be cheered, especially by any farmer. But at Montana State University, the recent accidental death of a 12-rat colony sent 20 years of research down the drain and was the cause of considerable unhappiness on the campus.

This particular colony, so far as anyone knows, was the only one of its kind in the world. Rats and other animals have a normal daily life rhythm, involving daily changes in temperature, blood sugar levels and other biological factors, all related to changes in light and temperature during the day and night. However, the special colony at MSU had been conditioned to have its normal rhythms upset. Artificial rhythms could be induced in the colony as many as five or six times a day.

Dr. Ludvig Browman, MSU zoology professor, had launched the experimental colony in 1944 and, through succeeding generations of the original group, he had brought the rats down a scientifically exciting and unique path.

Then, on a recent night, an automatic steam valve went awry in the conditioning room and the colony died of heat exhaustion.

As soon as safety equipment is installed in the animal room, Dr. Browman will re-launch the experiment. He figures that it will take at least five years of selective breeding to bring a new rat colony up to the point where the other colony left off. The second start will not take as long as the first one did because he now knows exactly what he is looking for and how to shorten the intervening time.

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