



Scuba Trips Not Part of HIV Research

A former college professor must pay back \$375,000.

March 27, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

As an esteemed HIV researcher at Hunter College in New York City, Jeffrey Parsons-Hietikko, PhD, was reimbursed for numerous scuba diving trips (to Cuba, Costa Rica, the Cayman Islands and other locations) that were part of his research, as well as for trips and flights to Denver, Chicago, South Africa and other cities. The research was funded through grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

It turns out, though, that the trips and expenses were for personal use, according to a settlement stemming from a civil fraud lawsuit by Damian Williams, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York.

According to the settlement, Parsons-Hietikko must pay the U.S. government \$375,000, and Hunter College, part of The City University of New York (CUNY), must pay \$200,000.

While at Hunter, Parsons-Hietikko oversaw the Center for HIV Educational Studies & Training (CHEST), which conducted research on sexual risk behaviors and recreational drug use among men who have sex with men. According to previous reporting by the New York Post, Parsons-Hietikko drew \$37 million in federal grants from 1997 to 2016. He resigned from Hunter in 2019 amid a sexual misconduct scandal.

The federal fraud case against him began in 2019 when a whistleblower—now known to be Devin English, who worked for the professor as a researcher—contacted the U.S. attorney's office and alerted officials about the false claims.

As part of the settlement, Parsons-Hietikko and Hunter College admitted to fraudulently using federal research funds.

"NIH provides funding to academic institutions for the purpose of furthering important research that impacts communities and improves lives," said U.S. Attorney Williams in the statement. "For years, Jeffrey Parsons-Hietikko obtained these funds under false pretenses, then used them to cover his personal expenses and for other purposes totally unrelated to research. Hunter College improperly used NIH funds to pay undisclosed bonuses to Parsons and for other expenses unrelated to NIH-funded work. When individuals and institutions abuse federal grant money, this Office will hold them accountable."

