



Scuba Trips Weren't Part of Professor's HIV Research, Finds Fraud Lawsuit

Jeffrey Parsons-Hietikko, a former Hunter College professor and leader of CHEST HIV research, must pay back \$375,000.

February 2, 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 made public](#) this week 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.

File image of Jeffrey Parsons-Hietikko, PhD
Courtesy of CHEST

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 (MSM). [According to previous reporting by the New York Post](#), Parsons 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 under 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 admit 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.”

The U.S. Attorney’s Office lays out the details of the case as such:

During his time at HUNTER, where he was promoted on multiple occasions and achieved the status of Distinguished Professor in 2012, PARSONS proved himself to be singularly proficient at obtaining NIH funding to support his and CHEST’s research. HUNTER considered PARSONS to be one of its most prized faculty members and offered him a number of perks, including discretionary spending accounts financed by NIH funds, a high level of personal control over CHEST’s federal grant funds, and special accommodations in the approval process for obtaining reimbursements from federal funds for his expenses. PARSONS then abused his authority and influence by repeatedly drawing from these discretionary accounts to fund personal expenses.

From January 1, 2010, through May 17, 2018 (the “Covered Period”), PARSONS and HUNTER defrauded the United States by materially misusing federal funds obtained from NIH and making false certifications and statements to NIH and HHS. First, PARSONS defrauded the Government by improperly using NIH funds that HUNTER had certified to HHS would only be used to support the facilities and administrative costs associated with HUNTER’s NIH grants (the “Indirect Cost Funds”) to reimburse himself for his personal travel expenses, including expenses relating to personal scuba diving trips, international flights for his family, and a tropical birthday celebration. PARSONS falsely represented that these reimbursement requests all had an academic or research purpose. PARSONS also improperly used Indirect Cost Funds to double the reimbursement he received for travel relating to his non-NIH-related work as a private consultant to external clients.

From December 2010 through December 2013, HUNTER improperly used the Indirect Cost Funds to pay PARSONS over \$90,000 in undisclosed retention bonuses, even though NIH rules and regulations prohibited the Indirect Cost Funds from being used to make such payments. HUNTER never disclosed and, indeed, took steps to hide its use of the Indirect Cost Funds to pay these bonuses to PARSONS.

During the Covered Period, PARSONS also misused CHEST’s NIH grant funds to pay CHEST staff for time they spent working for CHEST’s private consulting clients, rather than on NIH grant-related projects. In order to obtain NIH funds for this purpose, PARSONS approved timekeeping records representing that those staff spent their time and effort working on NIH-funded research projects. In reality, however, CHEST staff had also spent time working on unrelated projects commissioned by third parties, which were not properly reimbursable from the NIH grant funds and were not accurately reflected on the documents PARSONS submitted to obtain reimbursement. Although HUNTER was on notice that CHEST staff performed work on outside projects, it nevertheless sought and received NIH funds to improperly pay CHEST staff for this outside work. The third parties that commissioned CHEST to work on the outside

projects separately paid for the work performed by CHEST staff. HUNTER directed those payments into discretionary accounts to benefit CHEST and PARSONS, including one account used to reimburse PARSONS for alcohol expenses. Moreover, even after HUNTER became aware that NIH-funded CHEST staff had been improperly utilized to perform work for PARSONS's private consulting company, HUNTER never took steps to investigate or report to NIH this misuse of NIH funding.

In related news, Parsons-Hietikko resigned from his teaching position at Hunter College in 2019 after an investigation found that he violated CUNY's drug and alcohol policy as well as rules regarding sexual misconduct. You can read more about [that here](#).

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/scuba-trips-part-professors-hiv-research-finds-fraud-lawsuit>