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Agent Orange Review

Vol. 1, NO. 1

Information for Veterans Who Served in Vietnam

November 1982

Veterans Administration Steps Up Agent Orange Activities

When the Veterans Administration became aware of concerns about Agent Orange in 1978, the agency took immediate steps in what has become a continuing search for answers.

The first step was an extensive effort to gather authoritative information on Agent Orange and other known phenoxy herbicides from scientific literature and other sources. This effort led to the establishment of special agency and interagency committees to share information and provide recommendations to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs and to provide a focus for developing Agent Orange policy.

In recognition of the need to monitor closely and coordinate VA's Agent Orange efforts, the agency's chief medical director appointed a special assistant in April 1980 to administer all Agent Orange activities within VA's Department of Medicine and Surgery. The special assistant serves as liaison with other federal and nonfederal agencies and institutions that are conducting research and working toward establishing scientific evidence about the effects of Agent Orange.

In February 1982, the Administrator of Veterans Affairs established the Agent Orange Research and Education Office in order to provide a single focal point for the entire agency and to monitor interagency and international activities related to the phenoxy herbicides and other defoliant used during the Vietnam conflict.

Agent Orange Registry

The VA has a continuing program for examining Vietnam veterans who are concerned about the possible health effects of Agent Orange. The findings of these examinations are entered into the Agent Orange Registry. Vietnam veterans are encouraged to request an examination at their nearest VA health-care facility. A veteran who participates will receive a comprehensive physical examination and be asked to complete a questionnaire about his service in Vietnam. Following the examination, the veteran will be advised of the results. The examination could help to detect any illness or injury the veteran may have, regardless of origin, and may provide a basis for follow-up.

The registry currently is coordinated by environmental physicians located at each of VA's 172 medical centers and 6 independent outpatient clinics.

Agent Orange Pamphlets

A mailing was made in June to veterans on the registry as of March 8, 1982. Registry participants received copies of two VA

pamphlets on Agent Orange which covered VA Agent Orange activities and the provisions of Public Law 97-72, "Veterans' Health Care, Training and Small Business Loan Act of 1981." A letter also was included in the mailing to registry participants. Currently, a major effort is under way to update the addresses of all veterans on the registry.

VA efforts to resolve the complex health issues raised by Agent Orange also are progressing. For more information on Agent Orange studies, see p. 4.

The VA continues to cooperate with other government agencies and public institutions involved in Agent Orange research. The VA is closely monitoring the progress of a study of U.S. Air Force "Ranch Hand" personnel who were directly involved in herbicide spraying missions in Vietnam. In cooperation with the Department of Health & Human Services and the Department of Defense, the VA is jointly funding a birth defects study being conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

A plan is now in effect to provide an information and education program for concerned Vietnam veterans and their families on matters and progress relating to Agent Orange.

"Agent Orange Review": First Issue

"Agent Orange Review" is prepared by the VA's Office of Public and Consumer Affairs. The "Review" will be published periodically throughout the year as part of VA's expanded program to provide information on Agent Orange to concerned veterans and their families.

This first issue contains some information that you may have already received covering the medical care and treatment provisions of Public Law 97-72 and answers to commonly asked questions about Agent Orange. Future issues of the "Review" will contain updated information on Agent Orange-related matters, including Agent Orange studies.

If you have any questions about your Agent Orange examination, contact the environmental physician at the VA medical center where you had the examination.

If you have questions about VA benefits or Agent Orange, contact the VA facility nearest you. The phone number can be found in the white pages of your telephone book under "U.S. Government" listings.

Changes of address, along with mailing label, should be forwarded to the VA Data Processing Center (200/392), 1615 E. Woodward St., Austin, TX 78772, Attn: Agent Orange Clerk.



Questions and Answers About Agent Orange

Q. What is Agent Orange?

A. Agent Orange was a herbicide, or defoliant, used in Vietnam to kill unwanted vegetation that otherwise would have provided cover for the enemy. Agent Orange was a reddish-brown liquid made of two chemicals--2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-T. Both chemicals have been used widely throughout the world since the 1940s by farmers, foresters and homeowners. The herbicide was called "Agent Orange" because it was shipped to Vietnam in orange-striped barrels.

Q. Why are people worried about Agent Orange?

A. Beginning in 1978, a concern was expressed that the veterans exposed to Agent Orange when it was used in Vietnam between 1965 and 1971 might be subject to delayed health effects from the exposure. These concerns were based on the fact that one of the chemicals -- 2, 4, 5-T -- contained minute traces of a toxic chemical, dioxin (TCDD). This chemical contaminated the herbicide during the manufacturing process. The contaminant dioxin is of concern because animal studies have shown it to be toxic to certain species. Like other toxic substances, dioxin has produced a number of serious conditions among laboratory animals.

Q. What is being done to determine whether Vietnam veterans really were affected by Agent Orange?

A. The VA took a number of steps which included consulting with sources of information on herbicides, providing instructions to VA hospitals and offices to examine veterans and process claims, setting up a system to capture and correlate information obtained during examination of veterans who reported health concerns and encouraging research proposals among VA's 5,000 medical researchers. A search of worldwide scientific literature on Agent Orange was completed with VA funding, and the Agency has contracted for the development of an epidemiological study to determine what effects veterans might have suffered from exposure to Agent Orange. VA also has asked other government agencies to use their resources and expertise to help find answers to the remaining scientific questions.

Q. What are other federal agencies doing?

A. Major efforts are under way by the Department of the Air Force and the Centers for Disease Control. The Air Force is conducting an epidemiological study of "Ranch Hand" personnel--the aircrews who handled and sprayed Agent Orange in Vietnam. The current health of this group is considered especially significant because its members were heavily exposed to the chemicals and are among the few service members whose exposure is fully documented. The Centers for Disease Control are pursuing a study to determine the relationship between military service in Vietnam and the incidence of birth defects. Other studies include short- and long-term follow-up on populations exposed to dioxin during industrial accidents.

Q. What should a veteran do if he is concerned about Agent Orange?

A. The veteran should contact the nearest VA medical center for an examination. An appointment can be arranged, generally within two to three weeks. The veteran is asked a series of questions relating to possible exposure to herbicides in Vietnam. A medical history is then taken; a physical examination is performed; and a series of base-line laboratory tests, such as a chest X-ray, urinalysis and blood tests, are conducted. Consultations with other physicians are requested if the examining physician thinks it is medically indicated. The veteran is informed of the results of the examination, verbally and in writing, and is given the opportunity to ask for an explanation and advice. Where medically indicated, arrangements are made for scheduling a follow-up examination or additional laboratory tests. Information gathered in the examination is documented in the veteran's permanent medical record. This information also is entered into the computerized VA Agent Orange Registry.

Q. Will the VA treat Vietnam veterans who have health problems that they believe may have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange?

A. Under Public Law 97-72, approved on November 3, 1981, the VA can treat eligible veterans for certain disabilities that may have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Guidelines have been issued to all VA medical centers in order to implement this legislation. Individual veterans should contact the nearest VA medical center to determine their eligibility.

Q. What kinds of health problems are being reported by veterans?

A. Veterans have reported a wide range of symptoms, many of which relate to skin problems. Most of the other problems are of a nonspecific nature, such as headache, loss of drive, irritability and change of personality. These general symptoms do not focus on any specific diseases or organ systems. The numerous research efforts being conducted both inside and outside the federal government should provide some definite answers as to whether or not health problems among veterans are the result of service in Vietnam.

Q. Has any evidence been found that medical problems were actually caused by exposure to Agent Orange?

A. At present, the best available scientific evidence fails to indicate that exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides used in Vietnam has caused any long-term health problems for veterans or their children. One effect sometimes observed after dioxin exposure is a skin disorder, called chloracne, which in appearance resembles some common forms of acne. While some of the people exposed to dioxin in industrial accidents developed chloracne almost immediately, this reaction has not been firmly established among Vietnam veterans.

Q. What is the purpose of the VA Agent Orange Registry?

A. The registry represents VA efforts to identify all Vietnam veterans who are worried about the possible health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and to find out what types of medical problems they are experiencing. Veterans are provided a free physical examination and medical advice based on their current state of health. The registry serves as a mechanism to provide follow-up with these veterans should significant information develop.

Q. Will the Agent Orange Registry examination show whether a veteran has been or will be adversely affected by Agent Orange?

A. Because relatively little is known at present about the possible delayed effects of Agent Orange exposure on humans, the examination cannot establish a definite connection in an individual. Answers must await the results of on-going research. The examination will help to detect any illness or injury the veteran may have, regardless of origin, and may provide a basis for treatment. No characteristic symptoms or diseases have been noted among a significant number of the veterans undergoing registry examinations.

Q. Does Agent Orange exposure cause human birth defects?

A. There is no medical evidence to establish that exposure to Agent Orange has caused birth defects in the children of Vietnam veterans. Industrial workers exposed to the ingredients of Agent Orange have not fathered an increased proportion of children with birth defects. A study of male mice treated with Agent Orange revealed no effect on fertility nor on the rate of birth defects. However, some veterans have expressed concern about this possibility, and, therefore, the VA is providing funding for a major research effort in this area at the Centers for Disease Control.

Q. Why is the VA opposed to doing fat biopsies to check for the presence of TCDD (dioxin) in human tissue?

A. The test to determine if TCDD is present in body tissue is a highly complex and technically difficult process. First of all, it requires a surgical procedure to obtain enough fat for this chemical analysis. Second, there are only a few laboratories in the world that have the equipment and the technical expertise to conduct the analysis. Third, and probably most important, the VA has determined, based on a pilot study, that there is no good correlation between the presence of TCDD in body fat and known exposure to Agent Orange. In addition, there is no correlation between TCDD in body tissue and reported health problems. For these reasons, the VA at the present time does not believe that this procedure would be of any help to Vietnam veterans.

Q. Because the VA has no proof that Agent Orange does not cause problems, isn't it being overly bureaucratic by putting the burden of proof on veterans who have problems?

A. As a basis for compensating a veteran for permanent disabilities caused by military service, there must, in fact, be a disability or a symptom, not just a fear of one. There also must be a logical basis for a determination that a given disability had its inception during, or was aggravated by, the individual's military service.

Q. Is there a comprehensive source of scientific information about the herbicides used in Vietnam?

A. A review and an analysis of world literature on herbicides was completed in October 1981. The review was conducted by an independent organization under contract with the VA. Copies of the two-volume scientific document can be purchased as follows:

Volume 1: Analysis of Literature (Stock No. 051-000-00154-1), \$9.00 each

Volume 2: Annotated Bibliography (Stock No. 051-000-00155-9), \$9.50 each

Vendor: Superintendent of Documents
U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, DC 20401

VA Implements Provisions of Public Law 97-72

The VA has begun to carry out the medical care and treatment provisions of Public Law 97-72, the "Veterans' Health Care, Training and Small Business Loan Act of 1981."

Public Law 97-72 authorizes the Veterans Administration to "provide certain health care services to any veteran of the Vietnam Era (August 5, 1964 through May 7, 1975) who, while serving in Vietnam, may have been exposed to dioxin or to a toxic substance in a herbicide or defoliant used for military purposes. Health care services may not be provided, under this law, for the care of conditions which are found to have resulted from a cause other than exposure to these substances."

Types of Health Care

Health-care services authorized under the law are limited to hospital and nursing home care in VA facilities. Outpatient care may be provided at a VA facility:

- In order to prepare a veteran for hospitalization;
- In order to complete inpatient care that was initiated in a VA hospital; or
- In order to provide care that would make unnecessary the need for hospitalization.

These services will be provided without regard to the veteran's age, service-connected status or the ability of the veteran to defray the expenses of such care.

Veterans are furnished outpatient care under this authority within the limits of VA facilities' capacity to provide such care. Outpatient services may be provided on a fee-basis only in connection with post-hospital care and then only where VA or other government facilities lack the capability to provide the needed care or cannot do so economically because of geographical inaccessibility.

In providing outpatient care under this authority, VA is charged with assuring that veterans will be accorded priority ahead of other nonservice-connected veterans and equal to former POWs.

VA guidelines provide that a complete medical history, physical examination and appropriate diagnostic studies will be developed for each veteran who served in the Republic of Vietnam and who requests VA medical care. For those who have been examined within the past six months, only those procedures that are medically indicated by the current circumstances will be repeated. Where findings reveal a condition requiring treatment, the responsible staff physician must determine whether the condition resulted from a cause other than exposure to Agent Orange.

Health-Care Exceptions

Health-care services may not be provided under this law for the care of conditions that are found to have resulted from a cause other than the specified exposure. The physician will consider that the following types of conditions are not ordinarily considered to be due to such exposure:

- Congenital or developmental conditions, e.g., spina bifida, scoliosis;
- Conditions that are known to have pre-existed military service;
- Conditions resulting from trauma, e.g., deformity or limitation of motion of an extremity;
- Conditions having a specific and well-established etiology, e.g., tuberculosis, gout; and
- Common conditions having a well-recognized clinical course, e.g., inguinal hernia, acute appendicitis.

(See PL 97-72, page 4)

Agent Orange Research Update

New AO Studies Funded

The VA has launched ten new research projects concerning the health-related effects of Agent Orange. The projects are supported for up to five years with VA research funds in excess of \$2 million. The projects were selected from proposals submitted by individual investigators working in VA medical centers across the country. The projects primarily involve animal studies, but human tissue cultures will be analyzed in some of the experiments. Specific approaches range from behavioral observations of laboratory animals exposed to the defoliants used in Vietnam to biochemical studies of fat metabolism.

Vietnam Veteran Mortality Study

The VA is in the process of designing a large mortality study that will analyze and compare death rates and cause-of-death profiles between veterans with service in Vietnam and comparable veterans with no service in Vietnam. It is estimated that approximately 300,000 Vietnam and Vietnam-Era veterans have died since the start of the Vietnam conflict. This number includes approximately 52,000 combat deaths.

The mortality study will provide information that may prove useful primarily in suggesting areas for further scientific study.

The VA projects that it will take approximately two years to complete the study.

Birth Defects Study

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) initiated a study designed to determine if Vietnam veterans are at increased risk of having children with birth defects. Since 1968, CDC has maintained a registry of all babies born with defects in the greater metropolitan Atlanta area. Of the total 15,000 children on this registry, approximately 7,500 had significant anatomical defects at birth. The investigators will attempt to locate and interview the parents of all 7,500 of the children in this group. In addition, the parents of 3,000 matched control normal babies born during the same time period will be interviewed. Because the major objective of this study will be to determine whether an unusually high proportion of

fathers of babies born with defects served in Vietnam, information will be gathered about Vietnam service as well as other factors that may be associated with the occurrence of birth defects. If the study demonstrates that a Vietnam veteran has an increased risk of fathering a child with a defect, an attempt may be made to determine if the increase is associated with Agent Orange exposure or with some other factor or factors. The study is scheduled to be completed by September 1983.

Identical Twins' Study

The VA recently funded the development of a study of identical twins. The proposed study would involve identical twin veterans -- one of whom served in Vietnam and one who did not serve in Vietnam.

The study will be designed to investigate whether the current psychological and physical health of Vietnam veterans was adversely affected by their military experience in Vietnam. VA researchers at the St. Louis VA Medical Center have proposed the study and are developing the study protocol.

Once this is reviewed, some 450 pairs of identical twins will undergo physical examinations in late 1983. An initial report on the findings is expected by October 1984.

(PL 97-72, from page 3)

A physician may believe that a veteran requires care for any of these conditions and that these conditions present a complicating circumstance that make the provision of care under this authority appropriate. He may decide to provide such care following consultation with the facility chief of staff and the environmental physician.

PL 97-72 provides for health care only. A determination that a veteran is eligible for care under this law does not constitute a basis for service-connected disability or in any way affect determinations regarding service-connected disability.

Individual veterans should contact the nearest VA medical center to determine their eligibility. Any military records that the veteran has should be brought to the medical center in order to speed the process of eligibility and care and ensure a more complete medical history. Veterans who are not provided needed medical care under Public Law 97-72 may be furnished care if they are eligible under any other statutory authority.

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