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Study Confirms Agent Orange Caused Genetic Damage

STUFF.CO.NZ, JULY 28, 2006

Significant genetic damage to the DNA of Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange has been found in a study by Massey molecular scientists.

Analysis of blood samples from 25 New Zealand veterans exposed to the toxic defoliant showed that the group had suffered genetic damage.

Report author Al Rowland acknowledged the sample was statistically small, but said it was significant in that it showed up the damage caused to DNA. A more extensive study was now needed, he said.

Masters student Louise Edwards, who worked under the supervision of Dr Rowland, studied the rate of “sister chromatid exchange” in the cells – a test which analyses the way chromosomes self-replicate. A comparatively higher level of sister chromatid exchange identified in the study indicated genetic damage. The chromosomal reproduction of the 25 veterans was compared with a control group of former servicemen who did not serve in Vietnam.

Dr Rowland said the factors of smoking, alcohol consumption and the use of medical x-rays were taken into account when comparing the DNA of the two groups. “We don’t know what causes the results that we see but all we know is that this group went to Vietnam and something happened,” he said. In April this year the Nuclear Test Veterans Association released the results of a similar study conducted by Dr Rowland.

It involved the analysis of the DNA of navy veterans exposed to nuclear radiation during Operation Grapple in 1957 and 1958 where nuclear bombs were detonated at Christmas and Malden Islands. It also showed a significant level of genetic damage.

Veterans and their families who have battled with serious health problems and birth defects have argued for 30 years that Agent Orange has had a genetic impact on them and their children. Successive governments have said there was no proof the veterans had been exposed, let alone hurt. Two years ago, a select committee confirmed that Agent Orange was sprayed on New Zealand soldiers in Vietnam.

Ex-Vietnam Servicemen’s Association spokesman Chris Mullane said the study endorsed the findings of overseas research and confirmed what they had known for decades.

It was, however, good to have a study which specifically targeted the New Zealand experience, he told National Radio.

Mr Mullane agreed the study was a small one and hoped the Government would now support a wider study involving more veterans and their progeny.

A joint working group involving the Ex-Vietnam Servicemen’s Association and the Government, set up to study the health of Vietnam veterans and look at the possibility of paying compensation to those who have suffered health problems, is due to report back soon.

Veteran Affairs Minister Rick Barker has had the report since April.

Mr Mullane said he hoped the findings of the latest research would be considered by the group and would strengthen the families’ case for compensation.

The Green Party said the study showed the Government should reconsider its position on paying compensation. “This study indicates these men have suffered irreversible effects from their

exposure to the defoliant during their time in Vietnam,” said health spokeswoman Sue Kedgley. “It is time the Government acknowledged this and gave the veterans the compensation they have been seeking.”

BBC NEWS, JULY 28, 2006

Agent Orange 'caused gene damage'



Vietnamese children affected by Agent Orange. Agent Orange has been linked to disabilities in children. New Zealand troops who served in the Vietnam War suffered significant genetic damage from exposure to Agent Orange, a study suggests.

The chemical was used by the US military in Vietnam in the 1960s. It has been blamed for a variety of medical conditions suffered by soldiers and up to four million Vietnamese.

The study by New Zealand's scientists could have a big effect on campaigners' efforts to sue major chemical firms and the US government, correspondents say.

Highly toxic

The US military sprayed some 80m litres of Agent Orange on North and South Vietnam. The aim was to destroy jungle foliage in order to find communist fighters more easily. Agent Orange contained highly toxic dioxins which have since been blamed for causing cancers and other illnesses.

They have also been blamed for birth defects suffered by the children and even grandchildren of Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese civilians.

This has been strongly contested by the two main companies which made it – Dow and Monsanto – and the US government, the BBC's Bill Hayton in Hanoi says.

A team from New Zealand's Massey University has now shown that the group of 24 Vietnam veterans it tested suffered significant genetic damage, compared with a similar sized group of soldiers who did not serve in Vietnam, our correspondent says.

This may be crucial evidence in the lengthy legal battles still being waged in courts in the US and other countries to prove or disprove the link between Agent Orange and a legacy of illness across three continents, our correspondent says.