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Agent Orange and Vietnam Veterans

Following are typical of the questions about Agent Orange received by the Veterans Administration.

1. Q. Why is the Veterans Administration investigating Agent Orange when there are so many other government agencies already involved in the use and regulation of herbicides?

A. VA is concerned only with the question of whether herbicides used almost a decade ago in Vietnam could be affecting veterans' health today.

2. Q. What caused VA to become concerned?

A. During the past year, a theory was publicized that the use of Agent Orange herbicide in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971 might have latent effects on the health of military personnel who served there during that period. News media reports caused some veterans to feel that health problems they are now experiencing are related to Agent Orange. Others who have no symptoms fear that they might be harboring some chemical in their bodies that could cause health problems later.

3. Q. What kinds of health problems are suspected?

A. Health problems mentioned in 1978 news stories include hand tremors, weight loss, diminished sexual drive, cancer, birth defects in offspring, a skin condition called chloracne, liver damage and psychological problems. Veterans who heard of these reports have since reported an even wider range of problems which they attribute to their having been in Vietnam when herbicides were used.

4. Q. Is there any medical basis for believing that such a wide range of symptoms have a common cause?

A. There is no conclusive scientific evidence at this time that any of the symptoms, other than chloracne, are related to any of the chemical components of Agent Orange or other herbicides used in Vietnam.

5. Q. How did the media theories get started?

A. Veterans interviewed for a Chicago TV herbicide report were all identified by one Veterans Administration benefits counselor of the Chicago Regional Office. As a layman responsible for advising veterans on their VA benefits, she thought she saw a common cause in the wide range of medical problems reported by the veterans she interviewed. She theorized that these medical problems all started with exposure to Agent Orange during service in Vietnam.

6. Q. Did VA follow up on her observations and the theories on which they were based?

A. The VA investigation started immediately before the television report was aired and is continuing at this time. Since the broadcast, VA's steps have included consultation with every known source of information on herbicides, instructions to field stations, setting up a system to capture and correlate all information observed in veterans who reported these health problems, a study of medical data developed by VA medical facilities during treatment of millions of veterans each year, and a search for a method of testing veterans for the presence of dioxin.

7. Q. What has VA found with all these studies?

A. From the Department of Defense, VA learned that Agent Orange is one of a number of herbicides used in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971 to kill tall grass and defoliate trees and thus denied the enemy hiding places for attacking Americans. The Department of Agriculture and Interior advised that similar herbicides have been used in the United States and throughout the world for more than 30 years. They are still in use in forestration, agriculture, clearance of rights of way and in similar programs for control of unwanted plant growth. The National Academy of Sciences reported, after an extensive follow up study of the effects of herbicides in Vietnam, that there is no evidence of long-term health effects on humans from the use of herbicides in Vietnam. Similar findings are reported by the Air Force after a review of some 10,000 professional articles on herbicides.

8. Q. Is there any basis whatsoever for the theories that there are latent health effects from these herbicides?

A. A skin rash called chloracne has been linked definitely to contact with Agent Orange and similar herbicides. Chloracne is a form of contact dermatitis of the same type that

results from skin contact with other caustic substances like gasoline and certain household chemicals. When such contact does result in a rash, the reaction is immediate and of short duration.

9. Q. What is the basis for the other claims -- liver damage, psychological problems, cancer, etc.?

A. While the basic ingredients of Agent Orange -- 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T -- have a very low level of toxicity, the component 2,4,5-T sometimes breaks down to form a highly toxic substance, dioxin (TCDD), that occurs spontaneously in a variety of natural processes. Animal studies have linked dioxin to liver damage, spontaneous abortions and other organ damage in animals fed the substance over a prolonged period. Humans exposed to heavy concentrations of dioxin as a result of industrial accidents also have shown some severe short-term medical effects. No deaths or permanent medical effects on humans have been traced to this exposure, however.

10. Q. Was dioxin contained in the Agent Orange sprayed in Vietnam?

A. Samplings of the herbicides used in Vietnam showed that dioxin was present in some of the stored barrels in concentrations up to 40 parts per million. Other barrels contained no traces.

11. Q. Was there no other basis for the Chicago claims that veterans were suffering from exposure to Agent Orange?

A. A North Vietnamese doctor reported during the wartime period that N. Vietnamese populations exposed to the spraying showed an unusual incidence of spontaneous abortions, fetal deformities and liver cancer. He has acknowledged that he has no data to support his observations, but he holds to his belief that the medical problems he observed are related to the American spraying. Americans who accept his view cite the results of animal studies related to dioxin and an unproven theory that dioxin can be stored in body fat for long periods of time and later be released during periods of weight loss to cause health problems. This is the so-called "chemical time-bomb" theory.

12. Q. Why don't you test for dioxin in the bodies of veterans who think they have dioxin poisoning?

A. No simple test has yet been devised, but a VA research study is directed toward finding one. Fat samples taken from veterans who believe they have symptoms related to

documented wartime exposure to herbicides will be compared to samples taken from control subjects. If the comparisons are significant, biopsies will be taken of future claimants to check for the presence of dioxin.

13. Q. What happens when a veteran tells VA he has been exposed to Agent Orange?

A. If he has a medical problem, he is examined thoroughly and given the appropriate treatment for his symptoms. When an obvious origin for the symptoms can be identified, this is explained to the veteran. If he feels that the origin is related to his military service, he is advised to apply for compensation. VA then searches his military records for any link between the symptoms he manifests and something that was coincident in time with his military service. If he has no symptoms, he is given the best possible medical perspective on the subject and a notation is made in his records that he expressed concern about his exposure to Agent Orange. All this data is sent to a central collating point for any possible use it might have in the future.

14. Q. How many veterans have filed claims?

A. Since Marcy 1978 when the Chicago TV program was aired, some 500 claims have been filed throughout the VA system of 58 regional offices and 172 hospitals. Almost 300 of these claims were filed in Chicago. Inquiries of veterans seeking a better insight to news media reports have not been tabulated, but they are believed to be in the thousands. Following a recent drive in Arkansas during which veterans organizations urged all Vietnam veterans to get a check-up, about 200 inquiries were received in that state alone.

15. Q. What has VA learned from these inquiries and claims?

A. Out of the 200 veterans in Arkansas who requested check-ups, 60 have already been examined and the balance are scheduled for exams during the next two months. No link to Agent Orange has yet been found in any of those examined. Out of the 500 other claims filed, one case of chloracne was confirmed. This could have been caused by herbicides. However, the exact origin could not be confirmed. Twelve other conditions related to military service -- but not to Agent Orange -- were found among the 500.

16. Q. Didn't VA award "service connection" to a veteran who died recently of Agent Orange exposure?

A. A veteran who sought to prove that Agent Orange caused his abdominal cancer, was awarded service connection shortly before his death. No link could be established with herbicides, however. After independent medical authorities ruled out an Agent Orange connection with the cancer, VA found in the man's medical records that a precursor of cancer was observed during his military service. On that basis, he was awarded service connection for the cancer that developed after his discharge.

17. Q. Why doesn't VA conduct an outreach program to warn veterans exposed in Vietnam of possible danger to their health?

A. VA has said repeatedly that it urges all veterans to get an examination if they have any problem they think could be related to military service. More than 700,000 do this each year. Only 5 to 7 hundred have mentioned Agent Orange in connection with their claims, despite widespread publicity.

18. Q. Aren't some veterans afraid that their offspring will be deformed even if they have no symptoms? Is there any basis for this worry?

A. Several veterans and their wives have expressed this concern. The fear appears to be based on reports that pregnant females, after massive exposure, had an unusual number of spontaneous abortions and fetal deformities. Fear that exposed males can pass on genetic changes to their offspring appears to have no scientific basis whatsoever.

19. Q. Since 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 symptom, not just a fear of one. There must also be a logical basis for a presumption that a given disability had its inception during the individual's military service.

20. Q. Are those who claim symptoms the ones who got heavily sprayed?

A. The air crews that sprayed the herbicides in Vietnam were, without a doubt, the most heavily exposed group. In the process of loading and spraying in combat conditions,

many were drenched by Agent Orange and other herbicides. Several report that they have tasted it. No one from these groups has reported any unusual health problems, according to a fraternal organization of these veterans.

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