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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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June 27, 2014

The Honorable Sloan Gibson
Acting Secretary
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to ask that you take immediate steps to reverse the action of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Office of Public Health section, in retaining a certain outside consultant firm regarding Agent Orange.

Having this particular consultant represent VA at the June 16 public meeting of the National Academies of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) Committee on the Exposure of C-123 crews to Agent Orange is nothing short of reprehensible. As you move forward in your efforts to reestablish the trust of veterans in VA (including the strong united support of the nation's veterans service organizations), we caution that employing that particular consulting firm will be seen as an inappropriate, anti-veteran choice.

This consulting firm's decades-long association with the VA and its consistency of obsolete views over the past 40 years, despite all current scientific knowledge, is not what the public expects, as VA meets its own mandate for release of information:

“VA will ensure and maximize the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information it disseminates to the public.”

(http://www.rms.oit.va.gov/information_quality.asp#Release)

We ask that you review this firm's unique contractual involvement with the VA and make appropriate decisions.

We are alarmed that VA had already assumed a position and that the contractor directly informed the IOM of the VA's position. He made clear he was offering his input as a scientist to insure the integrity of the scientific record. In fact, as his own support documents submitted to the committee make clear, VA contracted with his firm to produce, and then release to the IOM, his reports, some of which targeted veterans' claims directly.

Whether from Young or from other personnel in the Office of Public Health (OPH), the use of the term “bioavailability” is now being used to deny claims. This is a term in the development of pharmaceuticals that is used to refer to how much and how fast the active ingredients reach the

specific part of the body that one is trying to affect. Of course, this has to be measured in a controlled setting. Air missions almost forty years ago do not lend themselves to such measurement. So this is nothing but junk science. If this were the standard used at the Love Canal, NY, or Times Beach, MO, toxic disasters, then one would judge that all those who died were not even sick, as “bioavailability” could not be measured or proven. This is patent nonsense.

This contractor’s reports, regardless of any possible partially factual accuracy they may convey, do not meet the appropriate standards of VA nor of any other federal, science-focused agency. The contractor’s reports yielded to the VHA/VBA agenda, serving VA rather than science and veterans. These reports could never survive peer review, yet VA selected this person to pressure the IOM into preventing the veterans’ exposure claims.

For four decades, this contractor has tried to obfuscate or hide the truth about the deleterious impact of Agent Orange. In fact, he has been paid to hide the truths regarding the negative health effects of Agent Orange and other phenoxy herbicides and organic phosphates used in Vietnam and elsewhere.

In possible violation of ethics, VA’s contractor failed to disclose his 2009 recommendation to destroy the stored, toxic C-123’s, which was acted on in 2010. He had advised the Air Force, in numerous memoranda, that unless the planes were destroyed, veterans might apply for presumptive service connection because of their exposures. He then congratulated the Air Force for carrying out the destruction in a manner “below the radar.” His opposition to C-123 veterans is anything but “below the radar.”

The contractor made numerous apparent misrepresentations during his June 16 presentation before the IOM, the most egregious of which was his use of photos of a reconditioned C-123, taken from a civilian owner’s website showing what the plane looks like today after the owner had rebuilt it. The consultant used these photos in an attempt to illustrate the 1972 results of Tail #664 and the other C-123s, claiming them to have been thoroughly refurbished after Vietnam. Actually, the photos he “borrowed” show modern cockpit modifications. The cargo deck photo shows equipment used today by the civilian owner for attending airshows. Certainly, these were not photos of modifications performed in 1972, as his report detailed. Of particular concern is the contractor’s use of the borrowed photos to challenge other scientists’ work, and we are troubled by such apparent deceptions aimed at these veterans.

While we would always rather focus on policies than personnel, in the case of this contractor, personnel *is* policy. On behalf of our nation’s veterans, we have an obligation to share with you the contractor’s record of positions, quite contrary to VA’s stated position, regarding the deleterious effects of one of the most toxic chemicals ever produced. The consultant’s record regarding Agent Orange is antithetical to good science on toxic exposures. Of grave concern are both his employment and the VA’s use of his “expertise” to construct obstacles to the delivery of care to veterans suffering from the very real toxic wounds afflicting our members and their families.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this contractor and other major problems of vital interest to our members.

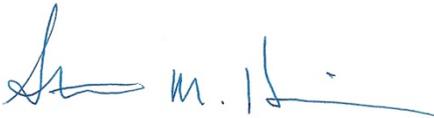
Sincerely,



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Executive Director
The American Legion



Homer S. Townsend, Jr.
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Paralyzed Veterans of America



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AMVETS (American Veterans)



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