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# Agent Orange Studies Overlook Vietnamese Americans



**New America Media, Commentary, Ngoc Nguyen, Posted: Oct 19, 2011**

A few years ago, my father, a former naval officer in the South Vietnamese Army, developed liver cancer. The diagnosis followed decades of struggle with Hepatitis C, a viral infection he contracted through a blood transfusion during the war. A liver transplant saved his life.

More than two years since the operation, and my father's life has been transformed from a state of "wait and see" to near normalcy, except for a daily regimen of dozens of pills. But, for Vietnamese Americans there is another legacy of the war that, like a sleeping dragon, may be starting to awaken: The possible health effects of exposure to wartime Agent Orange.

American forces sprayed 19 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides during the Vietnam War between 1961 and 1971, mostly in South Vietnam, to deny North Vietnamese soldiers cover in the country's dense forests and jungles. Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin, a highly toxic chemical that is persistent in human tissues and the environment.

That wartime spraying has been devastating to American veterans who came into contact with the defoliant and then developed any number of a long list of illnesses related to Agent Orange exposure. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences have linked Agent Orange/dioxin exposure to a slew of health conditions, including prostate, lung and other cancers, Parkinson's disease and leukemia, and birth defects in the children of veterans, such as spina bifida. Many of the symptoms are only just showing up now in soldiers who served and were exposed.

But the numerous studies on American veterans of the war stand in stark contrast to what little is known about the health effects of dioxin in Vietnamese living in the United States – whether they were born here or are former residents of South Vietnam.

According to a study published in the journal *Nature* by Columbia University professor emeritus Jeanne Stellman, as many as 4.8 million Vietnamese civilians were exposed to the chemicals during the war. The collapse of the government of South Vietnam brought an exodus of Vietnamese to the United States, with more than 125,000 refugees resettling here after 1975. The country's Vietnamese population now stands at more than 1.6 million, according to the last census count.

Among that group are former South Vietnamese veterans, who do not receive VA benefits, so their health status is not being tracked. The federal government has yet to conduct large-scale epidemiological studies of U.S. Vietnam veterans, and has not funded studies on their South Vietnamese counterparts.

Additionally, ARVN forces were not part of a 1985 out-of-court settlement with the chemical makers totaling \$180 million. Much of that money dried up before thousands of American veterans started to become sick from Agent Orange-related illnesses. Now, as the legal and medical battles move to the children and grandchildren of Vietnam vets who are also suffering the long-term effects of the chemical war agent, Vietnamese Americans continue to be overlooked.

Sailing up and down rivers in Binh Duong province in southern Vietnam during the war, my father says he didn't handle Agent Orange. But he does recalled seeing charred vegetation along the riverbanks, and said he knew it had been sprayed there. He says he doesn't believe he was exposed, as he was mainly on the vessel and drank from the boat's water supply.

But studies show the defoliant was sprayed on about 10 to 15 percent of South Vietnam in certain locations, with little spraying in urban areas. From Saigon, my father says areas outside of the city were sprayed. One in particular, Bien Hoa, just 32 kilometers north of Saigon, is a dioxin "hotspot."

Bien Hoa is home to a former U.S. air base used for Agent Orange-spraying missions. A large spill of the herbicide occurred underground there, and the area is still contaminated. A study from 2003 found that residents were still exposed to dioxin through animal fat, from eating fish, chickens and ducks and other tainted wildlife.

Bien Hoa residents also had higher dioxin levels than their counterparts in the North, where there was no spraying, and one resident of the city was found to have the highest level of dioxin ever recorded in the country. But while their children also showed elevated dioxin levels, these studies did not address long-term health effects.

Arnold Schechter, a professor of environmental sciences at the Univ. of Texas School of Public Health in Dallas and a leading researcher on dioxin exposure in the Vietnamese American community, said no one has conducted measures of dioxin exposure levels in the population.

## Political Sensitivities

Vietnamese immigrants in the United States are largely from South Vietnam, which fell to the communists in 1975. As such, many here do not want to do or say anything that gives credence to Hanoi's claims about the health effects of Agent Orange, part of a massive campaign to win compensation for victims of the defoliant. [A lawsuit brought by Vietnam against the chemical makers in federal court in New York was dismissed in 2005, and subsequent appeals have failed.]

Yet the lack of health studies for this group comes at a time when the symptoms of wartime exposure to Agent Orange/dioxin could be surfacing.

According to a Chicago Tribune investigation, "Service-related disability payments to Vietnam

veterans have surged 60 percent since 2003, reaching \$13.7 billion last year, and now account for more than half of such payments the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides to veterans of all wars.” The spike in disability claims suggests that the “long dormant effects of Agent Orange [are beginning] to surface,” according to the article.

For Vietnamese immigrants in the United States, who may have had a history of toxic exposure, it is critical to have this basic and baseline public health data, especially as many go on to work in jobs here, such as nail salons and dry cleaning shops, where they are exposed to additional harmful chemicals.

Growing up, my siblings and I never knew what my father saw or did on the battlefield, what he felt when he loaded his mother, brothers and sisters, his wife and his nine-month-old daughter, and others onto a ship that he then commandeered to Subic Bay, Philippines on April 30, 1975 – the day Saigon fell. We are just starting to have those conversations.

Now, with both my parents aging, the legacy of the war is both a distant memory and a palpable reality, sometimes extending its fingers into our lives.

*Ngoc Nguyen is environmental health editor and reporter for New America Media, a national nonprofit news service for ethnic media. She is reporting on the health impacts of Agent Orange/dioxin on the Vietnamese American community through a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism. Contact her at [nnguyen@newamericamedia.org](mailto:nnguyen@newamericamedia.org).*

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