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RESEARCH COUNCIL PANEL CALLS FOR MAJOR CHANGES IN AGENT ORANGE STUDY PROPOSED BY AIR FORCE

Cites Major Design Weaknesses,
Raises Credibility Question

FOR RELEASE: AMs, Thursday, May 8, 1980
(Distributed 5/7/80)

WASHINGTON--Citing "major weaknesses" in design, a National Research Council panel today advised the U.S. Air Force that its proposed "Ranch Hand" study of Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange was unlikely to identify adverse health effects related to exposure to the herbicide.

The panel endorsed the need for an epidemiological study on the herbicide's health effects, but cautioned that "it would be difficult to justify compensation claims" on the basis of the proposed study.

The panel pointed out the relatively small size of the group to be studied and the length of time proposed to follow the health of that group, concluding that an analysis of these data "could not be used to determine if Ranch Hand personnel are at increased risk of any organ-specific cancer or of other delayed and infrequent disease occurrences." Nor would the data generated by the proposed study, said the panel, allow conclusions to be drawn about the herbicide's relationship to birth defects or some of the uncommon disorders mentioned in veterans' complaints.

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The panel also expressed concern over whether involvement of Air Force or Department of Defense officials in the actual conduct of the proposed study might jeopardize its public credibility. The credibility question, suggested the panel, "could be resolved satisfactorily if the Air Force or the DOD were to provide funding for another group to design and conduct such a study."

The panel's major recommendations called upon the Air Force:

- # To redesign the study to include a considerably longer followup period;
- # To focus on a smaller number of disease indicators than currently planned;
- # To obtain additional peer review of the revised protocol; and
- # To reexamine its decision to conduct the study itself.

In a minority statement appended to the panel's report*, one panel member expressed his concern that the panel's recommendations "would lead to a long delay before the necessary studies are conducted" and suggested some modifications to the proposed protocol that he felt would offer a "reasonable opportunity" for detecting any long-term adverse health effects of the herbicide.

The report on the Proposed Air Force Study of Herbicide Orange was requested and funded by the U.S. Air Force and was chaired by Carl M. Shy, Institute for Environmental Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

*A limited supply of Review of U.S. Air Force Protocol: Epidemiological Investigation of Health Effects in Air Force Personnel Following Exposure to Herbicide Orange is available from the Committee on Toxicology, National Research Council, at the letterhead address. Press copies are available from the Office of Information, also at the letterhead address.

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Serving with Dr. Shy were Leon Gordis, department of epidemiology, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University; Ian T. Higgins, School of Public Health, University of Michigan Medical Center; Leonard T. Kurland, department of medical statistics, epidemiology and genetics, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota; Philip Landrigan, division of surveillance, hazard evaluations and field studies, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Cincinnati, Ohio; and Raymond Seltzer, department of epidemiology, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University.

Gordon W. Newell of the Research Council's Assembly of Life Sciences was staff officer for the study.

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