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VA in the News

Date: Thursday, September 29, 1983

News Clips

VA DISPUTES ORTHOPEDIC SURGEONS REPORT
Dr. Earl Brown tells a congressional that allegations in an Orthopedic surgeons' report are unfounded. The complained of broken equipment, delays in operations and other troubles at the nation's 172 hospitals.
UPI, Washington, D.C., 09/28/83, p. 1
USA TODAY, Washington, D.C., 09/28/83, p.1

DIOXIN TROUBLING QUESTIONS
New Jersey writes a first-person account of dioxin, his experiences in searching for answers. (Story appeared in New Jersey papers and not the one we get here at the office.)
NEW YORK TIMES, New York, N.Y. 09/11/83, p.2

VIETNAM MEDAL
The Treasury would be directed to mint and sell medallions honoring American servicemen and women who served in the Vietnam War, under a bill approved by a House Committee.
UPI, Washington, D.C., 09/28/83, p. 3

DIOXIN PANEL HEAD FIGHTS BUREAUCRACY
Story on Wayne Wilson, director of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission battle with the government. Wilson says he has seen his initial attitude of cautious cooperation with the VA become more and more adversarial. (Again, this story only ran in the N.Y. Times New Jersey editions).
N.Y. Times, New York, N.Y. 09/11/83, p.4

MILITARY WOMEN SAY ROLES LIMITED
Articles provides breakdown of women in uniform. While the ranks of the military have declined since 1971, the number of women and their percentage of total military personnel have risen dramatically.
USA TODAY, Washington, D.C., 09/29/83, p. 5

VETERANS

BY BARBARA ROSEWICZ

WASHINGTON (UPI) -- THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION IS DISPUTING A REPORT BY A GROUP OF ORTHOPEDIC SURGEONS THAT COMPLAINS OF BROKEN EQUIPMENT, DELAYS IN OPERATIONS AND OTHER TROUBLES AT THE NATION'S 172 VA HOSPITALS.

"MANY OF THE ALLEGATIONS IN THE REPORT ARE UNFOUNDED," D. EARL BROWN, ASSOCIATE DEPUTY CHIEF MEDICAL DIRECTOR AT THE VA, TOLD A CONGRESSIONAL PANEL TUESDAY.

BUT IN A SOMETIMES TENSE HEARING BEFORE THE HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS INVESTIGATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE, THE DOCTORS STUCK BY THEIR COMPLAINT THERE IS "AN INCREASING DETERIORATION OF MEDICAL CARE" IN ORTHOPEDIC SERVICES CAUSED BY BUDGET, BUREAUCRATIC AND PERSONNEL PROBLEMS.

THE REPORT WAS RELEASED IN JULY BY A VETERANS' AFFAIRS PANEL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ORTHOPEDIC CHAIRMAN.

REITERATING FINDINGS IN THE REPORT, DR. JAMES HUGHES OF JACKSON, MISS., SAID VETERANS OFTEN ARE FORCED TO WAIT FOR HIP SURGERY OR ARTIFICIAL LIMBS BECAUSE OF BUDGET PROBLEMS, WHILE MONEY IS SPENT ON LAWN SPRINKLERS, EARTHQUAKE-PROOFING AND OTHER NON-MEDICAL PROJECTS.

COMPLAINING OF SLOW REPLACEMENT OF MISSING OR MALFUNCTIONING SURGICAL EQUIPMENT, DR. JOSEPH KOPTA OF OKLAHOMA CITY SAID IT TOOK SIX MONTHS TO GET THE DOOR TO A VA OPERATING ROOM REPLACED AFTER IT FELL OFF ITS HINGES.

"WE PUT IN TWO REQUISITIONS AND NOTHING WAS DONE," HE SAID.

THE DOOR FINALLY WAS FIXED, HE SAID, "WHEN THEY FOUND OUT I WAS COMING HERE TO TESTIFY."

THE VA'S BROWN DISCOUNTED MUCH OF THE REPORT, COMPILED FROM CASE HISTORIES SUBMITTED BY VA ORTHOPEDIC DOCTORS. CALLING THE DOCUMENT "A DISSERVICE" TO OTHER VA HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS, HE CONCLUDED MANY OF THE REPORTED PROBLEMS "ARE COMMONPLACE" IN INSTITUTIONS.

USA TODAY, September 28, 1983

VA accused of ignoring unfavorable report

The Veterans Administration has failed to take seriously a highly critical doctors' report pointing to gross inadequacies at VA medical centers, Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn., charged Tuesday. Her angry outburst came after a top VA official rejected as "unfounded" the report's charges that "standards of good medical practice are grossly abandoned" at many VA facilities. At issue was a report by the Association of Orthopedic Chairmen, charging that medical care at VA facilities "is quite frequently determined by administrative and budget requirements rather than by standards of good medical practice."

Dioxin Troubling Questions

By JAN BARRY

THE news last June that dangerous levels of dioxin had been found on the site of the former Diamond Shamrock chemical plant in Newark, which made Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, was startling.

Like other reporters, I had written articles identifying that plant, in the Ironbound section, as a former Agent Orange manufacturing site. That was more than three years ago. At the time, no one in Government agencies had suggested there might still be measurable traces of dioxin there.

The second thing that jolted me about the news out of Newark was the blow to the credibility of Government experts. Those experts had repeatedly maintained that Vietnam veterans need not worry about Agent Orange because dioxin residue in Vietnam would, theoretically, have quickly dissipated in sunlight.

There was a third jolt — almost an aftershock — when I realized that dioxin's presence in Newark had never occurred to New Jersey's journalists, many of whom had done extensive reporting on Agent Orange.

How could experienced reporters have failed to ask about dioxin at that Newark site when the Federal Environmental Protection Agency first listed all the former Agent Orange plants in 1980?

Why did it take three years for someone — reportedly an environmental investigator in Puerto Rico — to ask the question that raised the lid on dioxin in New Jersey?

There should be a thorough re-examination of how the Agent Orange medical issue is being investigated.

Despite my being a Vietnam War veteran, I was ignorant of this issue until I began reporting on it in 1978.

Until recently, the big story was focused almost exclusively on Vietnam and veterans' accounts of illnesses they suspected were connected with the chemicals widely used, from 1962 to 1972, to defoliate war-zone jungles and rice fields. After several of my Agent Orange reports appeared early in 1980 — including one about the plant in Newark — editors asked me if I'd be willing to go to Vietnam if some way of detecting dioxin residue there could be found.

None of us thought of going to Newark to see whether dioxin could be detected right here at home.

Consider what has become known since June:

¶A dermatologist with the state University of Medicine and Dentistry said he had treated dozens of Shamrock Diamond workers since 1962 for chloracne, a skin disease associated with dioxin poisoning.

¶A Diamond Shamrock spokesman disclosed that the company had known about the skin disorders since the 1950's and had arranged for a dermatologist to investigate the cause. Without naming the plant or its site, that investigator reported his findings in the Archives of Dermatology in June 1964 — one of several obscure reports that Vietnam veterans' groups for years have pointed to as an indication of their health concerns.

¶The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) announced in Washington that a review of earlier studies of chemical workers at plants where dioxin was present had turned up an unexpectedly high rate of deaths from cancer, as well as hundreds of cases of chloracne.

The institute's news release, however, did not explain that a similar conclusion had been reached in a review it had made earlier of health studies on United States chemical workers. This review was published in a British medical journal, *The Lancet*, in January 1981, according to Dr. Peter C. Kahn, a Rutgers University biochemistry professor on the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission.

"There is lots of stuff that I've known about for years that, if the press were of a mind to, something could be made of it," Dr. Kahn said recently. "It's in the [medical research] literature. The evidence is not conclusive, but certainly there is strong circumstantial evidence."

After I questioned Dr. Kahn, it occurred to me that all of the above information could have been revealed three years ago if reporters had known enough to ask the E.P.A. if dioxin was still at the old Agent Orange plant sites.

And if these latest pieces in the Agent Orange puzzle had been presented then, wouldn't the efforts to solve this nagging health mystery have been three years ahead of where things now stand?

Because of these questions, I'm concerned that news people and dioxin investigators may still be groping in the dark, largely because of not knowing what questions to ask.

When health questions about Agent Orange first arose in the late 1960's, the focus was on new laboratory studies showing increased rates of cancer, birth defects and deaths among test animals exposed to ingredients of the herbicide. This news appeared after reports of birth defects, serious illnesses and deaths among Vietnamese farm families and mountain tribes exposed to herbicide spray.

Incredibly, no one at the time — not in the Federal Government, not from environmental groups, not from the press — asked about the possible health consequences for G.I.'s.

Nearly a decade passed before Vietnam veterans began to discover that question for themselves. This happened after a Veterans Administration case worker in Chicago took her concerns about these chemicals and what she perceived to be a pattern of illnesses among many Vietnam veterans — which the V.A. seemed content to ignore — to the press early in 1978.

Since then, public concern about the health effects of exposure to dioxin-contaminated herbicides has involved more than Vietnam veterans. Among the new cases were:

¶Pregnant women in rural Oregon who had been exposed to herbicide use in forestry. (This resulted in a health study used by the E.P.A. in 1979 as reason to ban most domestic uses of these herbicides.)

¶Entire communities in Buffalo, N.Y., and in Missouri that the Federal Government relocated because of dioxin contamination.

¶Dioxin-tainted fish from Michigan were banned from sale in New York last spring.

"More questions should be asked about toxic wastes," says Dr. Kahn. "The state is trying to find out where the Newark [Agent Orange] wastes went. But there are also lots of other toxic chemicals that are far more widespread than dioxin in our environment — PCB's, for example.

"Everyone knows that if you put toxic wastes in metal drums, eventually the drums leak. You can't landfill this stuff. What really needs to be done is to figure out how to detoxify it. Why isn't there a vigorous government effort to resolve this?"

Victor Yannacone, a Long Island lawyer representing Vietnam veterans in a class-action suit against Agent Orange manufacturers, offered another perspective after a television appearance in Newark last month.

"Follow the trail of consumer products containing trichlorophenol — that's where dioxin comes into the manufacturing process," he said. "Dioxin's been found in hexachlorophene and lots of other products besides herbicides. What has the Food and Drug Administration done about this since it first learned about dioxin in 1970? What has the Public Health Service done?"

Mr. Yannacone, who filed a new class-action suit against Diamond Shamrock in Superior Court in Trenton in June, on behalf of former employees and neighborhood residents, added another sobering question.

(Continued on next page)

Consider, he asked, what the health effects may have been for Garden State residents exposed to these same herbicides over decades of use along utility lines and other areas.

Two years ago, in an article in a national trial lawyers magazine, Mr. Yannacode wrote: "As one scientist expressed his concern, 'We may have stumbled on a cause for the rise in suburban cancer.'"

This question is the one that first engaged my attention when a Roxbury environmentalist investigating pollution of the Rockaway River in Morris County discovered in August 1978 that Jersey Central Power & Light Company had sprayed "the same stuff used in Vietnam" along power lines crossing the river, a major source of drinking water for Jersey City.

Indeed, a dilute mixture of the herbicides that made up Agent Orange had been sprayed for 30 years along the utility's power lines around the state.

A year later, these herbicides were banned for such uses by the E.P.A. Since then, to my knowledge, no follow-up health study on residents repeatedly exposed to the herbicide has been made.

Wayne P. Wilson, a Vietnam veteran and executive director of the state Agent Orange Commission, recently asked: "Why isn't the V.A. reaching out and coordinating [Government efforts on Agent Orange]?"

Although it was designated in 1979 the lead Government agency for Agent Orange health investigations, the V.A.'s handling of this issue led Congress last year to require that an epidemiological study of Vietnam veterans' health — ordered three years before and still not started — be turned over to the National Centers for Disease Control.

The state Agent Orange Commission was established in 1980 to help prod Washington. Frustrated by the pace of Federal action, the state commission — four veterans, three scientists and a staff of three with a \$250,000 budget — is planning its own health study of the state's estimated 90,000 Vietnam veterans.

This raises yet another question: Can a small state agency manage to establish (where the Federal Government has clearly feared to tread) undisputed facts about Vietnam veterans' cancer, death and dioxin exposure rates relative to the rest of Americans?

Earlier this year, a lawyer for Dow Chemical Company showed up at the state commission's monthly meeting with a tape recorder. Dow is a principal defendant in the Vietnam veterans' class action suit scheduled to come to trial soon in Federal Court on Long Island.

"I don't think it will be too much longer and the mystery [about Agent Orange's health effects] is going to come to an end," Guy A. Wiener, the state Agent Orange Commission chairman, said recently. "Dow has already offered twice to settle out of court." [Mr. Wiener resigned his post on July 26 but remains a member of the commission.]

One question that the New Jersey Agent Orange health study will not address — leaving it to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta — is whether there have been more birth defects among children of veterans.

Mr. Wiener's first child after his return from Vietnam 18 years ago was born with multiple defects. In recent years, informal surveys at two spina bifida associations in Morris County and on Long Island found that most of the fathers had served in Vietnam.

Air Force Lieut. Col. Alvin L.

Young said on a recent New Jersey television program — and again late last month in Washington — that no unusual patterns of health problems had shown up in the V.A.'s examinations of about 85,000 Vietnam veterans since 1978.

"We're finding the diseases that one would expect to see in a population of men growing old," said Colonel Young, who has been the Pentagon's chief troubleshooter on the Agent Orange controversy.

(Colonel Young was a co-author of a 1978 report to the Surgeon General of the Air Force that said that most dioxin in Agent Orange spray operations "would probably photodegrade within 24 hours" and therefore could not have been a serious health hazard for American troops.)

Mr. Wiener says he was diagnosed as suffering from chloracne by a military doctor years ago. Yet, he contends, when he went to the Veterans Administration, doctors there expressed no interest in his skin problems.

So many Vietnam veterans have complained of similarly inadequate V.A. examinations that the agency's "Agent Orange Registry" of 84,000 health exams is "almost useless," according to Mr. Wilson.

Scornful of years of such V.A. efforts, Mr. Wiener and Mr. Wilson have placed their faith in the resolution of this issue in the more modest efforts of Dr. Kahn and other to study the levels of dioxin in Garden State veterans who served in Vietnam, compared with control groups of residents who did not serve in Southeast Asia.

"This research has to be done," Mr. Wiener recently said, "because no one else is attempting anything."

UPI, September 28, 1983

VIETNAM MEDAL

WASHINGTON (AP) -- THE TREASURY WOULD BE DIRECTED TO MINT AND SELL MEDALLIONS HONORING THE AMERICAN SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR, UNDER A BILL APPROVED BY A HOUSE PANEL.

THE MEASURE WAS PASSED UNANIMOUSLY BY THE CONSUMER AFFAIRS AND COINAGE SUBCOMMITTEE ON TUESDAY, AND CHAIRMAN FRANK ANNUNZIO, D-ILL., SAID HE HOPES IT CAN BE BROUGHT BEFORE THE HOUSE AROUND OCT. 17.

UNDER THE BILL, THE TREASURY SECRETARY WOULD BE DIRECTED TO ENCOURAGE VIETNAM VETERANS, MEDALLIC ARTISTS AND OTHERS TO SUBMIT PROPOSED DESIGNS, WHICH HE WOULD CHOOSE AFTER CONSIDERING THE VIEWS OF ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTING VIETNAM VETERANS. THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FINE ARTS WOULD HAVE TO APPROVE THE DESIGN.

AP-WX-09-28-83 1659EDT

Dioxin Panel Head Fights Bureaucracy

By ROGER CONANT

TRENTON

THE fighting spirit has never left Wayne P. Wilson, a decorated combat veteran who now does battle with the Federal and state bureaucracies.

Mr. Wilson, executive director of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission, has seen his initial attitude of cautious cooperation with the Veterans Administration become more and more adversarial over what he views as a callous disregard for the needs of veterans — many of whom were exposed to the defoliant contaminated with the most toxic form of dioxin.

The commission's main purpose, under its charter, is to find out whether there are provable links between exposure to Agent Orange and

ailments reported by Vietnam veterans. After a touch-and-go political fight for survival last year, \$230,000 was eventually appropriated by the Legislature to further new research under the supervision of Dr. Peter C. Kahn, a commission member and a biochemist at Rutgers University's Cook College.

But Mr. Wilson's activities cover a lot of ground. In March, for example he testified in Washington in favor of a House bill to require the V.A. to presume veterans to have service-connected disabilities for chloracne (a skin rash known to be caused by dioxin exposure), soft-tissue sarcoma (a cancer linked in some studies to 2,4,5-T, which was an Agent Orange component) and a liver disorder linked to exposure to toxic substances.

The commission is "very much" advocacy-oriented, conceded Mr. Wilson, who was wounded on his second tour in Vietnam.

Mr. Wilson also contends that the Federal Government did little until state commissions began goading the Federal establishment and that that action is mostly negative.

"All Federal efforts seem to be aimed at proving that Agent Orange is not a risk," Mr. Wilson asserted.

Just getting the V.A. to listen to the state commissions has been a struggle, he said. About two years ago, according to Mr. Wilson, the commission had asked that the states be given representation on the V.A. advisory committee on the defoliant. Finally, in March, the new head of the V.A., Harry N. Walters, agreed to let state commissions collectively have one representative.

On the state political front, Mr. Wilson and commission members are in a wrangle with the Governor's office over the panel's leadership. Several weeks ago, Mr. Wilson received a copy of a letter signed by Governor Kean naming Paul Licitra, an insurance salesman and an aide to Senator Walter E. Foran, Republican of Flemington, as chairman to replace Guy A. Wiener, who resigned from his post but not from the commission, for health and professional reasons.

However, the commission, following its bylaws, had already elected one of its own, Allen Falk, a lawyer who served with the First Marine Division in Vietnam, to the position.

Mr. Wilson insisted that the commission, the veterans community and even the Governor's own Advisory Council on Veterans Affairs had not been consulted in advance.

One of the panel's objections, said Mr. Wilson, is that Mr. Licitra is unknown to people working on Agent Orange. Also, he said, the early phases of Dr. Kahn's research are about to begin at Barnert Memorial Hospital Center in Paterson. And other research is being considered by the Rutgers University Human Subjects Review Board, an ethics panel:

"The scientific people are very suspicious of any political involvement here at all," said Mr. Wilson, who said the panel was chartered as an autonomous unit.

In his latest skirmish with the V.A., Mr. Wilson sharply criticized a report to the American Chemical Society that said data collected on veterans screened through V.A. hospitals had turned up no link between Agent Orange or dioxin and health problems.

"We think the V.A. should take steps to take back the misinformation it put out," he said. Dr. Kahn assailed the report from the convention floor, said Mr. Wilson, adding that a Government Accounting Office study in 1982 had found fault with the hospital screening program as slack on the collection of basic information.

As another example of frustration, Mr. Wilson cited a major epidemiological study mandated by Congress three years ago, which was finally transferred from the V.A.'s to the National Centers for Disease Control — and which still has not been made.

"The V.A. clearly has set themselves up in an adversarial role," he asserted, saying Congressional hearings in April showed the agency was mostly concerned with having to pay compensation.

Despite heightened public awareness after disclosures about dioxin-tainted towns in Missouri, "the issue of Agent Orange is being controlled much too much by the V.A.," he said.

This ambiguous relationship with the V.A. is one reason the Legislature in the first place backed the need for independent, non-Federal research.

"Obviously, there are folks who don't want to accept the body of evidence" suggesting a link between Agent Orange and various disorders, Mr. Wilson continued, such as cancers, neurological disease and birth defects in children of veterans. "Nor

do we accept the V.A. position that there is no evidence."

"It is incumbent on someone to come up with scientific evidence either proving or disproving a link," he said.

Dr. Kahn's study, designed in consultation with experts at Rutgers, will seek to determine whether patterns of health effects can be traced to veterans with detectable levels of dioxin in their bodies. He is doing the research with a Swedish expert on dioxin poisoning, Dr. Christopher Rappe, who developed means to detect dioxin in residents of Seveso, Italy, years after an industrial accident spread a plume of dioxin over the town.

Concerning an Agent Orange conference sponsored by Vietnam in January, Mr. Wilson and commission members maintain that, despite the fact that "a lot of good people" attended, the draft summary of the conference "doesn't deal much in anything scientific" and recounts much

of what the commission already knows. At any rate, "anything coming out of there" will be viewed with suspicion in the United States, he said.

A secondary commission objective, Mr. Wilson said, has been to educate veterans, the public and legislators on some of the issues. As a result, the commission has established a rapport with many Vietnam veterans.

Mr. Wilson's cramped office here is swamped with calls and the office re-

(continued on next page)

sponds by sending out packets of information not only to New Jersey veterans but also to veterans throughout the country, on other issues of concern, such as delayed stress syndrome (in which some of the emotional trauma of combat does not surface until years later) and melioidosis, a tropical disease that typically afflicts the lungs.

The biggest payoff for his campaign, Mr. Wilson said, would be to alleviate the uncertainty so many veterans face on health effects.

The more the delay on verifying a link between Agent Orange and health problems — which Dr. Kahn has said is not certain at all — the

more the delay into research for treatment, noted Mr. Wilson.

And suppose Agent Orange is proved to be a major health threat to veterans, then what? "What's next?" he said. "I don't know what's next."

A subject that Mr. Wilson has downplayed, but that still raises a trace of indignation, is his salary: \$20,754. The father of two said he had been awaiting a raise to \$24,000 since July 1982 but it had been tied up in the Governor's office. As an unclassified state worker, he receives no scheduled raises.

"I'm probably the lowest paid executive director in the state of New Jersey," he likes to say. ■

8A • THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1983 • USA TODAY

Military women say roles limited

By Sheila Caudle
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Many of the nation's 190,000 military women are angry, and nervous, about Reagan administration moves to lower recruitment goals for Army women and to exclude them from more combat-related jobs.

They are concerned about the administration's efforts to close 21 new career fields to women, in addition to the 38 already closed, and to make 3,100 more units off-limits.

"In this man's army," complains one of its highest-ranking enlisted women — a sergeant major — "as a woman, you don't know where you're going. When they needed us they went out and courted us. Now we're not needed, so we're just sloughed to the side."

Another woman, a staff sergeant, claims current military policies offer no future "except 20 or 30 years of saying 'yes, sir' to a man."

The Defense Department

says such comments are unfair. It stands on its recent record of recruiting and promoting women.

Maj. Ann Wright, who teaches in the School for International Studies at the Army's crack special warfare center at Ft. Bragg, N.C., sees "men getting the best military training in the world here. But women can't be a part of that Special Forces training — women can't be in so many things."

Mary Evelyn Blagg Huey, Texas Woman's University president and head of the Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, told Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger earlier this year that the closing of military occupations is making women's advancement "difficult if not impossible and closing the higher ratings and rankings to women."

Today, she thinks that Weinberger is responding, and that people "shouldn't jump the gun to condemn the administration."

Women in uniform

While the ranks of the military have declined since 1971, the number of women and their percentage of total military personnel have risen dramatically. Here's a comparison:

Year	Total military	Total women	Female percent all military	Female percent all officers
1971	2,701,208	42,323	1.6%	3.5%
1973	2,241,230	55,070	2.5%	4.0%
1975	2,116,281	96,750	4.6%	4.7%
1977	2,063,074	117,722	5.7%	5.3%
1979	2,013,233	149,937	7.4%	6.9%
1981	2,068,885	183,594	8.9%	8.2%
1983	2,118,304	196,507	9.3%	8.9%

Source: Defense Department



By Julie Stacey, USA TODAY

Although virtually all of the action concerning women is happening in the Army, women in the other services are watching anxiously.

Lawrence Korb, assistant secretary of defense for manpower, says a big part of the problem has been communication — and mid-level defense bureaucrats putting out policy statements without checking at the top.

"What's ultimately going to happen is that (women) are going to have to look at your actions — they're louder than your words," says Korb.

Korb insists the military is committed to expanding opportunities for women — such as putting women on AWACs planes and in missile silo jobs — as it tries to break down institutional barriers of a formerly all-male environment.

Weinberger recently told the secretaries of all the military branches: "Military women can and should be utilized in all roles except those explicitly prohibited by combat exclusion statutes and related policy. This does not mean that the combat exclusion policy can be used to justify closing career opportunities to women."