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▶▶ June 2014 ◀◀

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Item ID Number 04974 **Not Scanned**

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Report/Article Title Health Status of Self-Selected Group of 86,000
Vietnam Veterans

Journal/Book Title

Year 1983

Month/Day

Color

Number of Images 0

Description Notes

Health Status of Self-Selected Group
of 86,000 Vietnam Veterans

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Since 1978 the Veterans Administration has provided at VA hospitals a complete physical examination and a group of baseline laboratory tests to each Vietnam veteran who was concerned about the adverse health effects of Agent Orange. Agent Orange was the mixture of phenoxy herbicides most commonly applied in Vietnam by the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam war. Self-reported health problems as well as veterans' recollections of exposure to Agent Orange were also recorded during the examination. Therefore, these data sets were limited by self-selection, subjective reporting of exposure to Agent Orange, and possible selective recall of symptoms and exposure. Notwithstanding the limitations we have analyzed 85,903 Agent Orange examinations that have been computerized as of May, 1983 because of the great concern placed upon the current health status of Vietnam veterans.

The distribution by branch of military service of veterans coming to VA hospitals for the examination closely paralleled the distribution of military personnel in Vietnam. A total of 23,030 veterans or 26.8% of all examinees had no symptoms. Among those veterans reporting symptoms 38.9% reported skin rash, 17.5% reported nervousness, 14.0% reported headache, 12.1% reported abdominal problems and 10.2% reported personality disorders. In 36,538 veterans, or 42.5% of all examinees the examining physician did not establish a diagnosis. Among the veterans diagnosed by physicians, skin disease was the most frequent (26.3%) followed by mental disorders (10.4%). A remarkably similar distribution of frequencies of symptoms and diagnoses was observed among each of the branches of military service. Distribution of malignant neoplasm cases in the Agent Orange Registry was similar to that of the reference population.

The strengths and limitations of the data base, which is the largest of this kind, will be discussed as well as the implications of the registry analyses.