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WHITE PAPER

SUBJ: Impact of Abolishing or Relocating the Research Section, Agent Orange Projects Office, Department of Medicine and Surgery

I was told on February 26, 1985, by the Director of the Agent Orange Projects Office that DM&S is considering the options of either closing down or moving the Research Section of the Agent Orange Projects Office outside of the Washington area, and that he was asked to prepare a plan to relocate the Research Section by the close of business the same day.

Consideration of abolishing the Research Section in the near future or relocating the Section outside of the Washington area should be viewed in conjunction with the inherent effect of terminating or substantially delaying the VA's two on-going major epidemiological studies and other research projects. Such actions will impact negatively on the following:

1. The goal of resolving the Agent Orange issues based on sound scientific and medical evidence;
2. The congressional and public perceptions of the VA's commitment to serve veterans; and
3. The efficient management of public funds.

1. Impact on scientific and medical evidence

The on-going Vietnam Veterans Mortality Study (VMS) is designed to provide, among other things, answers for 1) whether Vietnam veterans are at an increased risk of dying early from unexpected causes, 2) whether they are more likely to commit suicide, and 3) whether they are more likely to die from cancer, especially soft tissue sarcoma.

The VA's Mortality Study is the largest and most statistically powerful study of its kind. Neither the on-going CDC epidemiology study nor the already published Vietnam veterans mortality studies (Air Force Health Study, New York State, Massachusetts State, Australian mortality study) can match the size and scope of the VA Mortality Study.

Taking the issue of suicide among Vietnam veterans as an example, our preliminary data indicate that approximately 5,000 or 10% of the Vietnam era veterans in the VA Mortality Study, committed suicide. The CDC epidemiology study will have only approximately 100 suicide deaths available for analyses. The Research Section is now analyzing the

suicides with respect to Vietnam service, likelihood of exposure to Agent Orange, combat experience, length of service, rank, educational level, age, and many other factors.

With Dr. Gromwall's (DCMD) concurrence, the Research Section and the Readjustment Counseling Service (10B/RC) have also planned to conduct an in-depth review of the suicides. This effort is designed to lead to developing a clinical profile of the suicides which may assist the VA in preventing suicides in the years to come.

Without the completion of the VA Mortality Study no other studies, either on-going or planned, can provide such statistically powerful results, and the questions about Vietnam veterans' mortality patterns will be likely to remain inconclusive and unresolved.

The possibility that exposure to Agent Orange may have increased the risk of soft tissue sarcoma (STS) has been of genuine concern to Vietnam veterans, their families and the Congress. The VA/AFIP Soft Tissue Sarcoma Study is designed to address this major health concern. This study is also the largest and the most statistically powerful in dealing with the question of Vietnam service and soft tissue sarcoma. This study complements the CDC epidemiology study and vice versa.

The two epidemiologic studies now underway have been critically reviewed and approved by one or more of the following scientific groups: VA Advisory Committee on Health-Related Effects of Phenoxy Herbicides; Cabinet Council Agent Orange Working Group, Science Panel; Armed Forces Epidemiological Board.

The scientific credibility of the study designs and the caliber of the principal investigators have never been questioned. The scientific community is anticipating that the results from the studies will resolve many Agent Orange related health questions as evidenced by numerous invitations to scientific meetings to present the status of the various research projects. Examples are American Chemical Society, Society for Occupational and Environmental Health, International Symposium on Dioxin, Armed Forces Epidemiological Board.

Obviously, no single study can provide all the answers. However, the results of the on-going studies being conducted by the Research Section will provide some of the answers in an unequivocal way.

2. Congressional and public perceptions of the VA's commitment

The VA has repeatedly reported in congressional testimony its strong commitment to the resolution of the Agent Orange issues and on its in-house Agent Orange research efforts. Both the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees have requested and are receiving quarterly reports, as is the GAO, on the status of VA Agent Orange research activities.

The status of in-house Agent Orange research is routinely published in the "Agent Orange Review" prepared by VA's Office of Public and Consumer Affairs. The review is published periodically to provide information on Agent Orange to concerned veterans and their families. Approximately 115,000 Vietnam veterans who came to VA hospitals for Agent Orange examinations, and other concerned veterans, are on the mailing list.

The creation of the Research Section and the research which is now being conducted by the section is a reflection of the original and continuing congressional and service organization's concern and interest in the health issues. To terminate the research projects would cast serious doubts on the depth of the VA's original commitment and damage further the VA's image as the primary advocate of the veterans.

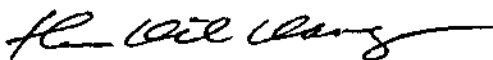
3. Mismanagement of public funds

Approximately 2.2 million dollars have already been spent or obligated on the studies and research projects to bring them to their current status of partial and near completion. Funds have been disbursed through contracts and interagency agreements. If the Research Section were to be abolished, these studies and projects are likely to remain incomplete, and the scientific issues which they address will remain unresolved. Therefore, an apparent saving by eliminating 5 FTEE from the Research Section would result in the waste of over two million dollars.

Recommendation

44
If DM&S is to implement the abolishment of the Research Section, it should be carried out on a "phase-out" basis. Results of the mortality study and the soft tissue sarcoma study are expected to be available by the 3rd quarter of FY 1986 and reports will be written, reviewed, and published by the 4th quarter of FY 1986. The VA can then close down the Research Section by the end of the 4th quarter of FY 1986, without extraordinary loss of funds and with the satisfaction that the VA has contributed to the resolution of the Agent Orange controversy based on the scientific evidence.

Relocation of the Section outside of the Washington area will substantially delay completion of the studies even if all key professional staff choose to move and adequate support services can be arranged. Such a move will also entail significant relocation expenses. However, if the relocation is only for the duration of completing the two studies some will choose not to move and it will be very difficult to recruit competent scientists with national reputations. Relocation of the Section outside of the Washington area is not recommended.



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