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Max Cleland, Administrator of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Administration, lays out the past and current VA and other government actions on Agent Orange Health issues. Undated.



VETERANS ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20420

AGENT ORANGE AND VETERANS' HEALTH
Max Cleland, Administrator
of Veterans Affairs

Both as Administrator and as a Vietnam veteran, I am vitally concerned about Agent Orange.

By far, my most important concern is for my fellow Vietnam veterans who may have been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam and who now believe their present medical problems are related to that exposure.

When VA's Chicago Regional Office received the first claims related to Agent Orange, the agency's response was immediate. I believe at this time that our response is thorough.

The investigative arm of Congress, the General Accounting Office, apparently agrees.

GAO made a complete investigation of the use of herbicides in Vietnam and the steps being taken by VA and other agencies with regard to the current concerns about after effects. Recommendations made by GAO's investigators indicated that VA should continue along the lines we had already established.

We, of course, will continue until all the answers are in about the possible effects on the present and future health of veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

It was in March 1978 that VA received the first suggestion that use of herbicides almost 10 years earlier was suspected by some veterans as being a factor in their health. VA immediately:

- mobilized all staff agencies into a steering committee to insure a complete and uniform response to the problem;
- advised all VA hospitals of veterans' concern and instructed them to report details of each examination made as a result of this interest;
- centralized claims adjudication to insure that no veteran was turned down without VACO concurrence;
- reviewed all pertinent literature on herbicides covering the 30 years of their use;
- contacted all government agencies with any known experience on the subject;

-- established a computer search of medical data generated in the course of treating some 1.2 million veterans per year with the goal of identifying any health patterns that might be related to exposure;

- launched a study of human body fat to determine what body mechanism might account for any delayed health effects and to develop a diagnostic technique if such a mechanism was confirmed; and,

- urged the study of all populations with known exposure to the chemicals in the past.

These epidemiological studies of exposed populations still appear to be the only way to confirm or refute the theories of long range effects on veterans.

This widespread inquiry has not yet been able to establish a link between exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam and the present or future health of veterans.

But because the concerns among veterans relate to such extremely serious fears as cancer, birth defects, liver problems, psychological problems, sexual dysfunction and others, VA has felt obligated to do everything possible to establish the medical and scientific facts on these subjects.

We are now getting government-wide help in this effort.

The Air Force is studying the health records of the aircrews who had unusually heavy exposure to Agent Orange as they loaded and dispensed it in Vietnam.

Two civilian communities exposed to the same chemicals through industrial accidents -- the populations of Nitro, W. Va., exposed in 1949, and Seveso, Italy, exposed in 1976 -- are being studied to determine how their subsequent health patterns might differ from unexposed groups.

The Center for Disease Control is monitoring United States birth statistics to determine whether the normal rate of defects, one per 1,000 births, remains stable or if types of defects change in any way.

The National Cancer Institute, in collaboration with the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, is studying the possible role of chemicals such as those in Agent Orange in the development of cancer.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences is in the midst of a long range study of the effects of environmental chemicals on the health of men.

The Environmental Protection Agency is monitoring the continuing use of Agent Orange chemicals in this country and following health statistics of populations in the areas where they are used.

University scientists are working independently on their own studies of these chemicals including the effects on animals from ingesting them on a daily basis.

All these agencies, and more, plus independent experts and representatives of the veterans VA serves, are advising me in our continuing search for answers to the remaining questions on Agent Orange. With their help as members of VA's "Advisory Committee on the Health Effects of Herbicides," we hope soon to get valid information to share with those veterans and their families whose health might have been affected or whose fears might have been aroused needlessly.

I remain personally committed that VA make a total effort to resolve these questions as soon as possible.

Until they are resolved, I will continue to urge veterans concerned about Agent Orange exposure to be examined at any VA medical center. Veterans who feel any present disability is related to Agent Orange should call any VA regional office on our toll-free lines for assistance in filing disability claims.

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