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TESTIMONY OF CONGRESSMAN TOM DOWNEY BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON

OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

TUESDAY, MAY 6, 1983

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee this morning regarding the Agent Orange issue which is of vital concern to all of us. My Colleagues and I have been besieged with questions and letters over the last few years from Vietnam veterans who are concerned about exposure to Agent Orange. A question asked by many, "What is the Veterans Administration doing to help me?," has become an embarrassing one to answer. The Vietnam veteran has tried turning to his government for answers and help and has been sorely disappointed.

The following is a section of a letter from a Vietnam veteran who is seriously ill due to exposure to Agent Orange. He describes how dissatisfied he was by the attitude of the doctor and the Agent Orange examination program itself.

To me it was rather farcial to take laboratory work done months earlier which had, in no way, anything to do with Agent Orange...So, once again, the American people, in the institution of the Veterans Administration, gave me a slap in the face for my service in Vietnam...I found this program conducted by the VA amidst great ballyhoo and publicity to be ineffectual and as insulting as was their so-called "Jobs-for-Vets" program of a few years ago. In an effort supposedly designed to reconcile the Vietnam vet with the rest of American Society, the major instrument for that reconciliation is doing more to widen the rift than to heal the wound!...The prognosis for me is 55% chance of living five years if I take chemotherapy and experimental drugs...Could all of this been caused by Agent Orange? Apparently, we'll never know because the VA doesn't want to find out...Bitter? Angry? Hurt? You bet your life I am!! I don't want their damned money, I just want a little help now that I am totally disabled and for my wife and children to have the satisfaction of knowing what really, in the final analysis, killed me! If not Agent Orange, fine, but let's not support anymore farces under the aegis of the VA such as the "Agent Orange Screening!"

I think this is a very sad commentary. This particular veteran has expressed the sentiment of many Vietnam veterans who are disgruntled, disappointed and disgusted with the inertia exhibited by the Veterans Administration. The Vietnam veterans have pressing questions about chemicals with catch code names--questions about chemicals that can defoliate a jungle, but supposedly not harm young men--questions about the lack of real concern by an agency that should be offering help.

The VA reminds me of a misbehaved child sitting in the corner with a dunce cap while the Congress must act the part of the stern teacher with a switch. At this point, the VA should be black and blue. If I were issuing the VA a report card it would receive an "A" for procrastination and an "F" for concern and action for Vietnam veterans.

Obviously, the VA has chosen not to pay attention to Congress' complaints regarding their program. I realize that the subject of the hearing today is the status of federally conducted Agent Orange studies, however, my testimony will focus on the General Accounting Office report I released in October of 1982, entitled, "VA's Agent Orange Examination Program: Actions Needed to More Effectively Address Veterans' Health Concerns."

I was both pleased and saddened to release the report. I was pleased that we in Congress have taken steps to try to solve the problems facing the Vietnam veteran and have confirmed veterans' charges against the VA.

I was saddened that the VA, the government agency which is supposed to abide by its motto, "To Care for him who shall have borne the battle," cares very little.

I requested the GAO study over two and one half years ago. It covered 14 VA hospitals nationwide and according to the the study, only one of the 14 medical centers adequately followed up on the health problems reported by veterans. The study clearly indicates that the VA has made little effort to insure that the problem is addressing veterans' health concerns. The study confirmed veterans complaints that medical examinations were incomplete. 891 veterans responded to the GAO questionnaire and 55% were dissatisfied with their Agent Orange examination. Those veterans said the following:

- 49 percent were dissatisfied with the interest VA personnel took in their health
- 47 percent were dissatisfied with the thoroughness of the questions VA personnel asked them
- 49 percent were dissatisfied with the opportunity they were given to ask questions
- 57 percent were dissatisfied with the completeness of their agent orange examination
- 80 percent were dissatisfied with the amount of information VA provided them about agent orange
- 83 percent were dissatisfied with the amount of information they learned from VA about their own exposure to agent orange
- 57 percent were dissatisfied with the amount of time VA spent on their examinations

Another major finding was that the examinations were performed by physicians not always knowledgeable about the potential health effects of agent orange. The GAO report states that "...about half of the environmental physicians expressed negative attitudes about the Agent Orange program...environmental physicians at six of the facilities told us that the program was of little or no use..."

The study further confirmed that little or no attempt was made to provide veterans with information on Agent Orange. Although about 500,000 Agent Orange information pamphlets were distributed to VA facilities, less than 9,000 were sent outside the VA system. A \$29,000 video tape on the Agent Orange examination program was mentioned by only two of the 112 VA facilities contacted in a GAO telephone survey. Only 4 of the 10 facilities provided the pamphlets to veterans who contacted the facility and only 24 of the 112 VA medical facilities GAO contacted by telephone survey told GAO about the pamphlet.

The sad irony is that the Vietnam veteran has literally been searching for answers while the VA practically hides its outreach materials. The GAO found that various states had established dioxin commissions and outreach programs which have proved very effective, unfortunately, the VA just doesn't follow suit. The VA doesn't reach out to those very veterans it was established to help.

Finally, the VA's \$3 million computer registry, containing the names of 89,000 Vietnam veterans examined for symptoms of Agent Orange exposure is of little or no use. The registry is not meeting two of its primary objectives: 1) providing information on health problems experienced by Vietnam veterans and 2) facilitating follow-up with veterans if necessary. Why is it not meeting its own objectives? The study found that "the registry does not contain the specific diagnoses of health problems and lacks adequate exposure and medical history information to compare veterans' health problems with their degree of exposure to agent orange or the area of Vietnam where they served." As far as its usefulness for follow-up, the VA did not include veterans addresses in the registry and the GAO found that at half of the facilities visited, the locator cards did not contain adequate information for follow-up with veterans.

In a letter dated, November 10, 1982, I requested that the Administrator of the Veterans Administration discontinue the Agent Orange registry. The Administrator responded by claiming that the registry had "...proved to be a useful mechanism..." and that "Full information can be retrieved from the medical center's files and the computerized registry provides an index to the additional data there." I find this highly questionable since the GAO found that "...only 8 of the 14 medical facilities visited maintained adequate information in the locator card system to permit follow-up contact with veterans, and none of the facilities routinely updated the locator card files...Generally, the cards were missing the veterans' city, state and zip code. It is serving no purpose and approximately, \$892,000.00 is spent annually on the registry. This money could be used in another area of the program. I am once again stating that the registry should be discontinued.

There is no question that that integrity of the Veterans Administration is at stake. How many times must the VA be reprimanded? How often does the VA need to be reminded of its function and responsibilities? How often must Congress ride on its tail? When will it start to move? I believe at this point it is up to the Congress to see that the VA is forced to improve its Agent Orange Examination Program. The Committee can be instrumental in providing oversight to see that the recommendations of the General Accounting Office are fully implemented by the Veterans Administration. The GAO report is a fine piece of work and could greatly benefit the Vietnam veteran. The VA continually promises that it will provide adequate care for these Vietnam veterans and yet the results just don't materialize.

There is no question that additional hearings are necessary so that the VA is forced to answer to this committee for its lackadaisical attitude. If the recommendations of the report were implemented, the Agent Orange Examination Program could benefit a great number of Vietnam veterans and perhaps restore some faith in the program. We cannot expect the Vietnam veteran to believe that the Veterans Administration is adequately assisting him if we don't believe it ourselves.

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In conclusion, I offer the following points: First, the Agent Orange registry is a mockery and should be discontinued. Secondly, there is a tremendous need for improved outreach and coordination of outreach materials. These materials should be reaching these veterans. Finally, I believe that oversight by the committee will insure this and also whether or not the examination program has been improved to meet the health care needs of the Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. Once again, I refer to the letter by the Vietnam veteran from Virginia who is right when he says that the way this program is being run widens the rift rather than heals the wound. The VA's inaction and unresponsiveness just adds salt to the wound. The time for healing is now.