Agent Orange Essay, Research Paper

Agent Orange Link

Diabetes Strongly Associated With Vietnam Exposure to Pesticide

U.S. Air Force planes spray the defoliant chemical Agent Orange over dense vegetation in South Vietnam in this 1966 photo. Dioxin is the component of Agent Orange linked to many health effects in laboratory animals. (AP Photo)

By Robert Burns

The Associated Press

W A S H I N G T O N, March 29 ? An Air Force study released today confirmed a connection, long suspected by Vietnam veterans, between wartime exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange and diabetes.

The Air Force said the link so far is only statistical and is yet to be proven conclusively by biological study.

The National Academy of Sciences, a research arm of the government, is reviewing the results and is to report to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which will decide possible compensation to veterans.

The study found a 47 percent increase in diabetes among veterans with the highest levels of dioxin in their bloodstream. Dioxin is the compound in Agent Orange linked to health effects in laboratory animals.

The result is based on 1997 physical examinations of 1,000 Air Force veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange during the nine years that it was used as a defoliant and crop killer in Vietnam.

Joel Michalek, the lead investigator in the study, told a Pentagon news conference that because studies have not yet explained a biological relation between dioxin and diabetes, the Air Force cannot say conclusively that wartime exposure to Agent Orange is a cause of diabetes.

Still, he said, the latest results provide ?the strongest evidence to date? that herbicide exposure is associated with diabetes. He said the Air Force knew as far back as 1991 of a statistical link between dioxin and diabetes and has since hardened its data based on additional physical exams of veterans.

The Air Force is financing research at two academic institutions on a biological link between dioxin and diabetes.

Also Linked to Heart Disease

In its report on the health effects on veterans involved in the aerial spraying of Agent Orange in Vietnam, the Air Force said it also found a 26 percent increase in heart disease. The increase was 50 percent among enlisted airmen who served as ground crew for Operation Ranch Hand, the military code name for the spraying campaign.

The ground crew are presumed to have had the greatest exposure to Agent Orange among 1,200 Air Force veterans who were involved in the spraying from 1962 to 1971.

The study found no consistent evidence that Agent Orange is related to cancer.

The Air Force report compared the health of exposed veterans with a ?control group? of 1,300 other Air Force veterans who served in Vietnam during the same years but had no contact with Agent Orange.

Air Force planes sprayed 11 million gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam to destroy jungle cover for communist supply lines, expose enemy sanctuaries and bases and destroy crops needed to feed enemy troops. The operation was equated by some critics at the time to chemical warfare.

Airmen were exposed to Agent Orange during their spraying flights, in the loading process and while doing maintenance on their aircraft and the spray equipment. The herbicide got its name from the orange-striped barrels in which it was shipped. It was one of several types of defoliant used during the war.

Results Long Suspected

Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., a member of the House Government Reform Committee that oversees veterans affairs, said the Air Force findings confirm a diabetes link that many people have long suspected.

?Given this latest evidence, the federal government must acknowledge the suffering of Vietnam veterans with diabetes and provide them with compensation to which they are entitled,? Sanders said Wednesday.

Sanders also said urged the United States to send researchers to Vietnam, which recently estimated that 1 million of its citizens are victims of Agent Orange.

The study was started in 1981 and the first physical examinations of exposed Air Force veterans were done a year later. The work is to be completed in 2006.

The Vietnam Veterans of America and other groups have criticized the study as being too small and they have accused the Air Force of being too secretive about its findings and too slow to make them available to other researchers.