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Gulf War Illness report shows cover-up by US government scientists

A US Congressional report on Gulf War illness has accused US Government scientists of covering up key data on the impact of depleted uranium on veterans' health.

12 December 2008 - Dave Cullen



In mid November, a committee set up by the US Congress released a landmark report on Gulf War Illness (GWI), an event widely reported by the media. It was considered a landmark study, as it stated categorically that the ill effects suffered by veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War were real, and amounted to a distinct medical condition.

The report identified two probable causes of this illness - pyridostigmine bromide (PB) pills which were given to troops to protect them from nerve agents, and pesticides which were liberally used to protect troops from insects.

However, amidst all the fuss, some incredibly damning information on the US government's response to the use of uranium weapons was completely ignored by the media. The section on DU related a litany of irrelevant research, obstructive and incompetent behaviour by the US government, and confirmation that a touchstone study on veterans affected by DU covered up an incidence of cancer in the group.

McDiarmid study

Melissa McDiarmid's Baltimore study, which looks at the health of friendly fire victims, many of whom have DU fragments in their bodies, drew particular criticism. This study is frequently referred to by the UK and US governments when they seek to defend DU, and has been repeatedly attacked by campaigners – all of whom are vindicated by the report.

While the DoD has indicated that at least 900 veterans were involved in incidents that could cause higher-level DU exposure, only 70 were studied in total – and only 30 in any single follow up. The crude categories used for medical problems and the lack of a control group in all but one of the studies, mean that they are of little use for drawing meaningful conclusions. It is also suggested that the studies failed to follow up significant findings, including detectable levels of uranium in the sperm of several veterans in 1997.

Cancer cover-up

Most damning of all is the attempt to cover up the incidence of tumours in McDiarmid's study group. The fact that one veteran developed Hodgkin's lymphoma is mentioned in passing in one write-up in 1999, but omitted from subsequent reports, and the occurrence of a non-malignant bone tumour in another is not mentioned at all.

This was first exposed by US veteran and DU researcher Dan Fahey, and was mentioned in his presentation during ICBUW's workshop at the United Nations in April 2008, but the fact that the committee confirmed it is a huge vindication. The omission is euphemistically described as 'puzzling', and the committee questioned the study director about it, who apparently replied that: "these cases were not included because they were not believed to be the result of DU exposure."

Knowledge gaps

In comparison to the relatively clear evidence for PB and pesticides being a possible cause of Gulf War illness, the information on other possible causes is much less clear, and DU falls into this category. The report makes clear that there are huge gaps in our knowledge concerning the use of uranium munitions.

Unlike oil well fires and possible nerve agent exposure, the US government has not provided reports into the areas where DU was used, and the units most likely to be affected. Although a map exists, it appears the committee was not shown it. Instead they have to fall back on the estimates by Dan Fahey that several hundred thousand veterans may have been exposed to DU.

Other knowledge gaps highlighted by the committee are that most of the models used to estimate the dangers of DU are based around the scenario of friendly fire incidents, which are not typical of the majority of exposures, and that self-reporting – the main source of information for studies which track exposure to health problems – will be even less reliable as most soldiers knew nothing about DU during deployment.

Flawed studies

The concentration in research into well understood diagnosable conditions is singled out for particular criticism, as it is practically useless in assessing any link between DU exposure and the collection of ill-defined symptoms that constitute GWI. The report is particularly critical of the US Institute of Medicine's 'Gulf War and Health' reports for this reason. While the report on DU is not singled out for particular criticism, this flaw and the omission of important research in other reports in the series lead the committee to declare the series did not fulfil their legal requirements, and it recommends that the government office that commissioned them should be stripped of responsibility for future research.

Potential dangers of DU

There may have been some disagreement within the committee about the potential dangers of DU, as they cite preliminary evidence from animal studies of its damaging effects on the brain as "potentially of great importance" but state that more research is required before they could make recommendations on the basis of this evidence. They also go out of their way to point out that health concerns about DU are much broader than GWI, and there is scant evidence with which to judge its links with cancers and birth defects. Indeed, it is implied that the Department for Veterans Affairs has not released information it has on the health of veterans' families.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are very simple – suitably broad epidemiological studies of veterans to establish links between DU exposure and health outcomes, more sophisticated attempts to establish exposure than self-reporting, and monitoring of cancer and mortality amongst veterans thought to be active in areas where DU has been used. As this is the kind of recommendation which a first year medical student would have made when the DU issue came to prominence, it is hard to think of a greater indictment of the 17 years of research since 1991.

Notes:

Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses: <http://www1.va.gov/RAC-GWVI/>

Attachments

- [Gulf War Illness and the Health of Gulf War Veterans \(7178 Kb - Format pdf\)](#)
- The Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses was created by Congress in 1998, and first appointed by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi in January, 2002. The mission of the Committee is to make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on government research relating to the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theatre of operations during the Persian Gulf War.
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