

Item ID Number 01454

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Report/Article Title Typescript: Agent Orange

Journal/Book Title

Year 0000

Month/Day

Color []

Number of Images 2

Description Notes update on on-going Agent Orange studies

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AGENT ORANGE

The AOWG was established in 1981 and is the overall coordinator, clearinghouse, and evaluator of the Federal research effort on health issues surrounding the use of Agent Orange (AO) during the Vietnam conflict. During FY'88 several important AO related events have taken place. The Science Panel of the AOWG issued a AO Status Report which was widely circulated and simultaneously implemented the Status Report as a "Living Document" residing on a VAX 780 DEC computer at the National Center for Toxicological Research. The status of any AO related project may be updated at any time via an electronic mail facility.

The CDC's major effort on "The Vietnam Veterans Experience Study" was completed. One of the most revealing item from that study was that what was stated during the telephone interview was not always confirmed through the medical examination! (see item 1 and 4 below). CDC summarized the study as follows: [1] Vietnam veterans were more likely to report health problems, yet few differences were detected on examination; [2] Vietnam veterans were found more likely to have hearing loss and certain deficiencies in semen quality; [3] Vietnam veterans were more likely to have psychological problems; and [4] Vietnam veterans reported more birth defects in their children, yet birth defect rates were not elevated based on objective evidence.

The Air Force report on the second examination of the Ranch Hand personnel was released in November, 1987 (Air Force Health Study: An Epidemiologic Investigation of Health Effects in Air Force Personnel Following Exposure to Herbicides). This study was received with many accolades; it also negated many of the positive findings of the earlier 1984 examination. Unfortunately, a report of the 1984 findings by Dr. Richard A. Albanese entitled "United States Air Force Personnel and Exposure to Herbicide Orange" wasn't released until the Spring of 1988. Some individuals still do not understand that this is a much delayed release of the 1984 data and that the 1987 Ranch Hand reports negates most of the Albanese findings; several times it has been obvious that the 1988 Albanese report has been taken as the more current data base rather than the 1987 Ranch Hand report. This mistake is most unfortunate!

The CDC's AO Exposure Study was cancelled after a great deal of time and effort had been expended in attempting to identify an exposed cohort. After rejecting all attempts at identifying a study population based on Vietnam military records alone due to valid scientific limitations, the CDC attempted to use a state-of-the-art GC/MS analytical technique that they had developed to measure the TCDD serum levels. The Validation Study found the following: (1) no association between TCDD serum levels and ANY indirect estimate of Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam; and [2] the median TCDD serum levels were 3.8 ppt in the Vietnam

veteran group (range of < 1 to 45 ppt) and 3.8 ppt in non-Vietnam veterans (range of < 1 to 15 ppt). However, the same CDC laboratory found the mean serum dioxin level in Ranch Handers participating in the Air Force Health Study to be 49.4 ppt (range of 3.2 to 313 ppt) with a control group mean of 5.2 ppt (range of 2.0 to 21.3 ppt). Analyzing samples of stored serum from many Ranch Handers obtained over 5 years ago and comparing them with current serum samples from the same individual for TCDD levels, a serum TCDD half-life was able to be calculated of approximately 7 years. This half-life information coupled with the low TCDD serum levels found in the CDC Validation study provided the necessary information to conclude that an AO exposed Vietnam cohort could not be identified even using state-of-the-art techniques and that the AO Exposure Study could not be validly conducted.

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