US abandons health study on Agent Orange

Declan Butler

A programme to investigate the health and environmental damage caused by widespread use of the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War has been cancelled before it even began.

Scientists say that the collapse of the project is largely the result of cultural differences, a lack of communication, and a deep reservoir of suspicion between the Vietnamese and US governments.

The United States used Agent Orange to reduce forest cover during the Vietnam War. But since the war's end in 1975, Vietnam has suffered a high number of birth defects — estimated to be 2–3 times the expected number in some areas — which it blames on the defoliant.

The herbicides that made up Agent Orange were contaminated with dioxins, a highly toxic group of chemicals. But a lack of reliable epidemiological studies means that there is uncertainty over the suspected link between dioxins and birth defects. Such studies are difficult to do in part because a single test for dioxins costs US$1,400.

HOANG DINH NAM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Vietnam blames many of its birth defects on Agent Orange.

The joint US–Vietnamese research project would have analysed dioxin levels in 300 mothers of babies with birth defects, along with 300 mothers of healthy children. The study was approved in May 2003 by the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. But the institute pulled the plug on the project last month because, after two years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Health had still not approved the research protocols needed to begin the work.

David Carpenter, the study's principal investigator and an environmental health researcher at the University at Albany in New York, says that the project fell victim to politics with "two different cultures coming together and not communicating well". This led to misunderstandings from the outset, he says. Before funds of $1 million a year for the three-year project were freed up, the NIEHS provided $300,000 for a pilot study to verify that dioxin levels would be detectable in Vietnamese women. Although done for valid scientific reasons, this was not fully explained to Vietnamese officials, who viewed it as a snub, says Carpenter.

"The NIEHS was probably insisting on protocols to ensure a real, valid study; the implications of which the Vietnamese either didn't understand when they agreed, or else simply don't want," says Jeanne Mager Stellman, a scientist at Columbia University in New York, whose research has provided maps of herbicide spraying in Vietnam (see *Nature* **422,** 649; 2003).

Anne Sassaman, a director at the NIEHS, defends the decision to cancel the project, saying that progress has been minimal despite repeated visits by NIEHS officials to Vietnam and the agency playing host to three Vietnamese delegations. A general agreement to conduct joint research between the countries (see *Nature* **416,** 252; 2002) is still in place, she adds, and the NIEHS "remains hopeful that other studies on Agent Orange can be conducted in the future; we would be very happy to support them".

But researchers close to the programme say that the Agent Orange study was viewed by the NIEHS as a test case, and in the wake of its failure the agency is likely to be reluctant to entertain new proposals. "I'm not optimistic about what's next," says Carpenter.

The study was expected to provide evidence for a class action suit on behalf of millions of Vietnamese plaintiffs against US manufacturers of Agent Orange. This case was dismissed by a US judge on 10 March on the grounds that use of the defoliant in Vietnam could not be considered a war crime. ■

Postdocs slam zealous attitude of NIH ethics office

Rex Dalton, San Diego

Is an honorary plaque costing little more than $25 enough to cause a conflict of interest for a US National Institutes of Health (NIH) administrator?

The biomedical research agency's ethics office certainly thought so last year when it advised the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) that it could spend only $25 on an award plaque for Ruth Kirschstein, the former acting director of the NIH.

The ethics office, which deals with issues at the 27 NIH institutes and their 18,000 employees, faces a tough challenge. It is supposed to prevent lobbyists from corrupting the agency and to guard against insiders exploiting the system for personal gain. But critics say it is going too far.

That's certainly what Alyson Reed, director of the Washington-based NPA, thought when her young organization sought to present Kirschstein with its inaugural Distinguished Service Award. "We had a hard time finding a plaque that cheap," says Reed.

Holli Beckerman Jaffe, an attorney who directs the NIH ethics office, explains that only plaques of "little intrinsic value" are permitted. The $25 was probably a rough estimate made by an office staffer, she says.

Another implication of the ethics rules became apparent last month when three top NIH officials — including Tony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases — were introduced by name, but not affiliation, at a dinner held by the lobby group Research!America.

The steady flow of such anecdotes is beginning to irk researchers both inside and outside the NIH. "It's madness," says John Hardy, chief of the neurogenetics lab at the National Institute on Aging. But he says the sometimes arbitrary rules are just something that researchers should learn to live with. "It is very hard for a large organization to have common sense," he says. "You just accept it."

But researchers may soon have to accept even more of it: last month the NIH published tighter conflict-of-interest rules (see *Nature* 434, 3–4; 2005). These are already under attack from organizations such as the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB).

"Many of the rules are overly restrictive," says Paul Kincade, president of FASEB. He adds that their implementation will "limit the ability of NIH scientists to engage in critically important teaching and scholarly activity." ■