

Suicide-inquiry fallout 'could gag' scientists

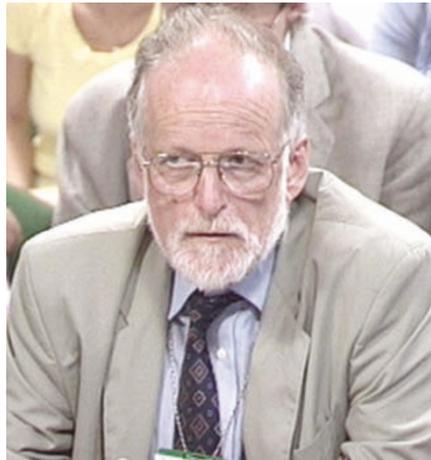
Jim Giles, London

When the report into the death of UK government scientist David Kelly was published on 28 January, a painful picture emerged of the biowarfare researcher's last days. Kelly, who committed suicide last July after being caught in the crossfire between the government and the BBC, was revealed as an extremely private man who felt unable to discuss the extraordinary stress he was under, even with his family.

But for the people who worked with him, Kelly was a valued expert and a vital source of accurate information. In the aftermath of Lord Hutton's report into his death, many fear that such sources will be hard to find as government scientists become less willing to share what they know. "I used to meet Kelly at conferences where there was a relatively free flow of information," says Malcolm Dando, a specialist in international security at the University of Bradford. "It will be to the detriment of my work if that flow ends."

Kelly was a leading expert on biological weapons. As former head of microbiology at Britain's Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down, Wiltshire, he was credited with reorientating the facility towards monitoring proliferation after Britain renounced chemical and biological weapons in 1972. But Kelly really made his name in the tight-knit international community of specialists in weapons of mass destruction in the early 1990s, when he investigated two weapons programmes.

On a series of visits to Russian biotechnology laboratories, as part of an Anglo-American inspection programme, Kelly helped to uncover a clandestine biological-weapons programme that had continued there long



David Kelly committed suicide in July as a row raged over UK intelligence on Iraqi weapons.

after the Soviet Union publicly renounced such weapons. And after the 1991 Gulf War, his patient questioning of Iraqi scientists as part of a United Nations team helped to force the country's government to admit that it held stocks of biological weapons.

The insights that Kelly gained made him an excellent contact for security researchers. "His presence at seminars helped us understand the issues we study," says Richard Guthrie, an expert on chemical and biological weapons at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Like others in his field, Guthrie suspects that government scientists all over the world may be less willing to talk after seeing the pressure that Kelly was placed under.

Kelly took his own life after being named as the source for a news story on BBC radio by reporter Andrew Gilligan, who alleged that

the British government had distorted intelligence about Iraq's weapons programmes to make the case for military intervention. Kelly admitted meeting Gilligan but denied he was the source for the story — a denial that was publicly exposed as false in circumstances that probably led to his suicide.

Although Kelly breached civil-service rules by discussing intelligence matters with Gilligan and other journalists, he was officially authorized to discuss technical matters with them. Kelly regularly attended academic seminars, but Guthrie fears that others will now think twice about talking openly at seminars. "If I was a civil servant and someone came up to me during coffee, I might not want to talk to them," he says. "I might not even go to the seminar."

Others caution against reading too much into Kelly's case. Graham Pearson, a retired head of Porton Down, says that very few government scientists have access to the kind of intelligence that Kelly had, so they won't feel under pressure to curtail their interactions with academics.

Kelly's death was nonetheless a heavy blow to those who study biological-weapons proliferation. This small group remembers him as a helpful and open colleague — but the inquiry starkly revealed the kind of double life that he was obliged to lead.

Some of the most poignant testimony came from his widow, who revealed that as a media storm raged around Gilligan's report and its then-unnamed source, Kelly remained silent at home. He only hinted at his role on 8 July — more than a week after he had revealed it to the Ministry of Defence and a full month after Gilligan's broadcast. ■

▶ www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk

Fusion meeting shelved as site decision slides

Declan Butler, Paris

Ministers from the partners in ITER, a US\$5-billion international fusion experiment, have postponed a meeting scheduled for this month to select a site for the project.

The delay has been caused by deadlock over the choice between France or Japan as host for the project, which would seek to prove the principle of creating fusion energy by heating plasma constrained by a magnetic field.

Negotiations over ITER's site have been stalled since a ministerial meeting in Washington in December, when the United States and Korea backed the Japanese site at Rokkasho, and China and Russia supported the European Union's site at Cadarache in

France. Negotiators asked France and Japan to answer questions on the technical merits of each site, and to consider making the experimental reactor into part of a broader, international fusion-research package.

The ministers agreed to reconvene in February but, with no agreement in sight, another failed meeting "would have given the impression that the whole ITER process was falling apart", according to an official close to the negotiations. Now ITER's backers hope a delay will help draw the political sting from the negotiations, which have been overshadowed by the perception that the United States is supporting Japan out of a desire to punish France for its stance over last year's invasion of Iraq.

The broader research programme would

look, for example, at how the reactor walls of a future fusion power plant stand up to radiation damage, and at superconducting magnets. Such a programme would cost about \$800 million, and would be seen as a way of compensating the country that doesn't get to house the main experiment.

In the absence of a ministerial meeting, government officials connected to ITER will meet in Vienna on 21 February to try to break the deadlock.

Meanwhile, the European Union and Japan are engaged in talks in a bid to find a way forward. One European official says that the European Union is offering South Korea and Japan support for projects ranging from genomics to neutron science, if they will support the French bid to host ITER. ■