

STATEMENT
of the
AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
to the

Subcommittee on Compensation, Pension
and Insurance
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

Presented by
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RE: Dioxin

July 12, 1983

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is John R. Beljan, M.D. I am Senior Vice-President of Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. I am currently a member of the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association. I served as chairman of the Association's Advisory Panel on Toxic Substances that prepared the AMA's 1981 report on "Agent Orange" and dioxin contamination. Accompanying me are Leonard D. Fenninger, M.D., AMA's Vice President for Medical Education and Scientific Policy, and Harry N. Peterson, Director of the Association's Division of Legislative Activities.

Mr. Chairman, we are pleased to accept your invitation to appear here today to discuss the AMA's view concerning the human health effects of exposure to the dioxin TCDD. This subject is particularly important in light of the legislation currently before this Subcommittee.

H.R. 1961 would authorize disability payments to veterans who served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam era who suffer from soft-tissue sarcomas, porphyria cutanea tarda and chloracne. Such payments would be allowed as "service connected" disabilities without establishing that the disease was contracted or aggravated in the line of duty. The bill would establish an entitlement to disability payments even if an individual never came into contact with "Agent Orange." The bill would also allow the Administrator of the Veterans Administration to establish by regulation other diseases "that medical research has shown may be due to exposure to herbicides, chemicals, medications, or environmental hazards or conditions."

In 1981, the AMA House of Delegates adopted a report entitled "The Health Effects of 'Agent Orange' and Polychlorinated Dioxin Contaminants." Copies of this report were submitted to the Subcommittee with our formal statement. This report was developed by the Association's Council on Scientific Affairs and was based on the investigation of its Select Panel on Toxic Substances of which I was Chairman. This report was initiated because of concern about the reported adverse health effects to humans from exposure to "Agent Orange" during the Viet Nam conflict. Medical complaints noted by veterans included weight loss, liver damage, recurrent skin rashes, deformed offspring, stillbirths, cancer, sterility, personality changes and other

illnesses. The report, however, was not limited to studies involving exposure of U.S. forces to "Agent Orange" but included a review of all reported exposures during the last four decades. The dioxin TCDD was present in "Agent Orange" as a byproduct of its manufacture.

The AMA report on dioxin was an examination of the then-available current information on the effects of the substance on animals and human health. This study by our expert panel was a major undertaking given the very substantial amount of literature reporting experience with animal and human populations that has been generated over the last four decades. The report states, "TCDD by itself is extremely toxic; along with botulinus sacillus toxin and aflatoxin, it is one of the most lethal organic chemical compounds known to man." The report recognizes and describes the toxicity of TCDD pointing out the varying toxicity among different animal species and the relationship between toxicity and the amount and type of exposure and ingress to the body. This position, formulated in 1981, is still the policy of the AMA.

The report concludes that of the suggested adverse health effects on human beings attributed to dioxin exposure, there is conclusive evidence of a cause and effect relationship only with respect to chloracne. Chloracne is a not uncommon form of occupational dermatitis and may be caused by other chemical agents. It usually clears within several months of exposure, although severe chloracne may be persistent and has been known to last for as long as 15 years following cessation of exposure to the causal agent.

With respect to other suggested human health effects attributed to dioxin (TCDD), the Council on Scientific Affairs and its advisory panel

concluded that there was insufficient published data subject to peer review to establish a relationship between dioxin exposure and the adverse health effect. The report reviews in detail the published scientific literature that supports these conclusions. I would note that the report of the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress entitled, "Dioxin: Environmental Impacts and Potential Human Health Effects," published June 6, 1983, surveys the body of scientific opinion and its conclusions. This survey is consonant with the 1981 AMA report.

In light of the foregoing, legislation should not go beyond chloracne associated with exposure to "Agent Orange" containing the dioxin TCDD.

Mr. Chairman, the AMA has a continuing obligation to promote the public health in matters such as this and to inform the profession and the public of the most current information. We note that this matter is not static and that new evidence will be reviewed as it becomes available. Therefore, we do not intend to let this important matter drop.

Action taken by our House of Delegates calls for an updating of our report on "Agent Orange" and dioxin this year along with an active program to provide the public the most accurate information available on dioxin. The new literature is scheduled to be reviewed by our expert panel next month. The findings are expected to be presented to the AMA Board of Trustees in October with consideration by the House of Delegates at its meeting in December. We will inform you of our conclusions.

Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.