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VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A broadening of the inquiry into possible effects of Agent Orange on veterans who served in Vietnam was announced today by Max Cleland, Administrator of Veterans Affairs.

Supplementing Veterans Administration research in the matter of Agent Orange, which has been underway for more than a year, Cleland said other government agencies are or will be engaging in companion studies of populations most heavily exposed to herbicides similar to those sprayed in Vietnam from 1963 to 1971.

The Air Force will conduct a detailed study of some 1,200 servicemen and veterans who engaged in "Operation Ranch Hand" in Vietnam. The military personnel engaged in this operation were directly exposed to Agent Orange as they handled the herbicide containers and flew the spraying missions.

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The purpose of this long-range study will be to determine if any causal relationship can be established between herbicide exposure and long-term health status. Data gathered on the Ranch Hands will be compared to a large control group not exposed to herbicides. The Air Force estimates the study will take about six years.

In a joint study involving American and Italian scientists, the National Academy of Sciences is probing the consequences of a 1976 industrial accident in Seveso, Italy. The accident in a herbicide manufacturing plant heavily exposed 134 plant workers, and also exposed about 100,000 citizens when a gas cloud drifted over the area.

The NAS study in Seveso is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Center for Disease Control, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. A report on the study, already underway, is expected to be made in January or February 1981.

Another study of an industrial accident - in Nitro, West Virginia, - is being correlated by HEW's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The Nitro study involves a chemical plant explosion in 1949 that grossly exposed 288 employees to herbicides containing dioxin, and also exposed to some degree much of the local populace.

VA Administrator Cleland also revealed that good progress is being made in VA's search for a clinical procedure that might determine the presence of dioxin in human body fat. A VA pilot study in this area is expected to be completed this summer.

Although VA physicians and scientists have been consulting with leading authorities on herbicides within and outside the government on an ad hoc basis since its research was undertaken early last year, Cleland said a formal VA Advisory Committee on Herbicides is being established and will hold its first meeting June 11.

The 15-member advisory committee will be comprised of outstanding physicians and scientists and will also include a Vietnam combat veteran. The committee will monitor all research and claims activities involving Agent Orange.

Cleland said VA's research thus far has found no conclusive evidence that Agent Orange exposure causes long-term health effects. The only clearly related effect of Agent Orange established to date, he said, is chloracne, a skin rash developing immediately after or within a few months of exposure.

The VA Administrator also disclosed that VA physicians recently met with Dr. Ton That Tung, the Vietnam physician who has been visiting America reporting on his studies of the impact of Agent Orange on the civilian population in his country.

Dr. Tung, who has reported increased incidents of children born with deformities and spontaneous abortions among Vietnamese women exposed to Agent Orange, told VA doctors the incidents were related only to pregnant women exposed to herbicides. Dr. Tung said he knew of no birth defects which might have been transmitted by a

father who had been exposed to Agent Orange to a mother who had no herbicide exposure.

Cleland said VA continues to urge Vietnam veterans concerned about Agent Orange exposure to request a medical examination at any VA medical center. Veterans who feel any present disability is related to Agent Orange should call any VA regional office on toll-free lines for assistance in filing disability claims, he added.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Max Cleland, Administrator of Veterans Affairs, today lauded a Department of Defense decision to do an in-depth follow up on 1200 Vietnam veterans who were heavily exposed to Agent Orange while involved in spraying operations in Vietnam. "This is the most significant single step of a year-long study to determine what causal relationship exists, if any, between exposure and long range health effects," Cleland said.

The 1200 people to be studied were involved in handling and spraying Agent Orange during air missions known as "Operation Ranchhand." Data on their health will be matched to a larger group not exposed. The study will take six years.

VA has been involved in its own study of the problem for more than a year.

Cleland listed these steps:

* coordinated study of each veteran who reports his concern about Agent Orange to any of VA's 172 hospitals to determine if a pattern of health problems will emerge.

* a pilot study to determine what body mechanism, if any, exists to make it possible for the chemicals to have a long range effect. Results of this study will be available this summer.

* an advisory group of experts from throughout government, industry and academia will meet formally in June. Most members of this multi-discipline group have advised VA throughout its year-long study.

* computer analysis of medical data generated by VA's annual treatment of 1.5 million veterans in its hospitals are being studied for any existing pattern of health problems that might be related to herbicides.

* consultation with every known source of information on the subject including conversations last month between VA scientists and the Vietnamese physician, Dr. T. That Tung, whose observations of health problems among North Vietnamese civilians sparked the controversy.

These steps, Cleland said are in addition to follow up studies by other government agencies of the populations of Nitro, W. Va., and Seveso, Italy, which were heavily exposed to the suspect chemicals through industrial accidents. The West Virginia explosion, more than 30 years ago, is expected to serve as the best laboratory for possible long range effects.

Cleland said, "I believe these are appropriate initiatives which will define the effects of Agent Orange. I urge Vietnam veterans who are concerned to call their local VA for further information on VA's toll free lines."