Agent Orange an enigma to science

By DANIEL Q. HANEY
AP Science Writer

BOSTON (AP) — The question on the minds of Vietnam veterans is simple: Did Agent Orange cause their cancer or their children's birth defects or their wives' miscarriages?

Science doesn't know and probably never will.

The key to such a crucial uncertainty — the bond between one man's troubles and a chemical that touched him — is beyond the powers of epidemiology, the tool that's used to ferret out specific dangers in a world full of danger.

By one estimate, the federal government will spend more than $100 million on at least 64 studies to examine the hazards of the jungle-killing chemical and what it did to soldiers who lived with it.

At best, however, these studies are likely to show whether there is a statistical relationship between the defoliant and increased levels of disease.

For the individual, this information can raise or lower suspicions. But it cannot settle whether an Army sergeant is sick today because he was sprayed with Agent Orange in Vietnam 20 years ago.

Last Monday, seven companies that made the chemical agreed to create a $180 million fund for the thousands of Vietnam vets and family members who believe the berbicide harmed them. But the companies denied liability for the veterans' troubles, and the question remains open.

"With the kinds of health outcomes that we're concerned about with Agent Orange and other environmental exposures, almost to a man they are nonspecific," says Dr. Clark Heath of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

"You look at a case of leukemia, and you can't know whether it was caused by radiation received in the dentist's chair or benzene in the gasoline he uses in his car or some hereditary influence. No matter what the cause, they all look alike."

From 1965 to 1971, the government sprayed 12 million gallons of Agent Orange to kill forests that hid the enemy in South Vietnam. The chemical is a mixture of two herbicides — 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D — and it was contaminted with dioxin, a poison that causes cancer, birth defects and other problems in laboratory animals.

Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange claim they have suffered unusual numbers of a variety of ills, including cancer, skin disease, liver damage, personality changes and nerve injury as well as birth defects in their children and miscarriages among their wives.

The problem is proving that their woes result from Agent Orange.

"During the course of their lives, people are exposed to a whole variety of things," said Joseph R. Fiksel, a risk analysis specialist at the consulting firm of Arthur D. Little. "We smoke; we eat; we drink; we are immersed in an environment of carcinogenic agents."

To argue their case, veterans' groups and their lawyers have assembled groups of veterans and their offspring who suffer ills they allege result from the spray.

Epidemiologists, however, generally dismiss this evidence as "anecdotal." In other words, the ailments could have happened anyway. There is an expected rate of occurrence for every illness, no matter how rare.

For instance, Dr. Allen A. Mitchell of the Boston University Drug Epidemiology Unit noted that five out of every 100 children were born with birth defects. They are victims of "the biological lottery."

Monsanto, Dow pay the most

NEW YORK (AP) — Monsanto Co. paid nearly half the $180 million settlement reached last week between thousands of Vietnam veterans and seven manufacturers of the herbicide Agent Orange, according to an insurance industry trade magazine.

Monsanto of St. Louis paid $81.9 million, or 45.5 percent, and Dow Chemical Co. of Midland, Mich., paid $35.1 million, or 19.5 percent, the Chicago-based magazine Business Insurance reported in its Monday edition.

The seven companies agreed to set up a $180 million trust fund that will finance payments to veterans, their wives and children who claim to have been injured by the veterans' exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

The allocation of the $180 million payment among the seven companies has not been made public, and Business Insurance did not disclose the source of its information.