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**January 28, 2003**

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# Leukemia in Vietnam vets linked to Agent Orange

WASHINGTON (AP) — Researchers have found a link between a type of leukemia and Vietnam soldiers exposed to herbicides like Agent Orange, prompting the Veterans Affairs Department to announce it will extend benefits to veterans with the illness.

The veterans diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, or CLL, would start receiving improved benefits, such as disability compensation and priority health care services, in about a year, Secretary Anthony Principi said Thursday.

"It's sad that we have to presume service connection, because we know that (veterans) have cancer that may have been caused by their battlefield service. But it's the right thing to do," Principi said.

Veterans Affairs expects to find about 500 new cases of CLL a year among Vietnam veterans, said spokesman Phil Budahn. About 2.6 million people served in Vietnam during the war and most are still alive.

There are 10,000 Vietnam veterans receiving disability pay for other illnesses related to exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the war, Veterans Affairs said.

The Institute of Medicine, which re-examined past research on cancer rates in agricultural workers and farm community residents, announced Thursday that it had found the link between the form of leukemia and Vietnam herbicides.

"It's just one more indication that service on the battlefield exposes men and women to dangers beyond bullets, shrapnel and missiles," said Principi, who requested the review.

"Environmental hazards are as worrisome and deadly as some of the more common forms of battlefield injury."

U.S. troops sprayed 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides over parts of South Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and '70s to clear dense jungle. Some veterans reported a variety of health problems shortly after returning from the war.

Some forms of cancer, Type 2 diabetes and birth defects in veterans' children already are considered associated with herbicide exposures during the war. But it has been difficult to research the problem because no one knows how much chemicals troops were exposed to, the Institute of Medicine said.

"For more than two decades we've had many complaints from Vietnam veterans about serious

problems from Agent Orange exposure and it taken a long time to have sufficient proof to satisfy the VA and now we have it," said Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., Senate Veterans Affairs Committee chairman.

Waco Democratic Rep. Chet Edwards welcomed the news. His district includes Fort Hood Army post from which thousands of troops have been deployed in the buildup for potential war in Iraq.

"Veterans should receive the benefit of the doubt regarding illnesses being service related," Edwards said. "Their sacrifice for our country have earned them that benefit."

By connecting the defoliant and CLL, the Institute of Medicine altered its own previous finding that not enough scientific evidence existed to determine whether the two were associated. The institute is part of the National Academy of Sciences.

Previously, researchers lumped CLL with other forms of leukemia when looking at cancer rates among Vietnam veterans. But this time the scientists examined rates of CLL separately, said Dr. Paul Engstrom, a member of the review committee and a vice president with Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia.

The scientists said although CLL is a form of leukemia, it shares some similarities with Hodgkin's disease and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, two diseases that have long been known to be associated with exposures to the types of chemicals used in Agent Orange and other defoliants.

Although health care is available to nearly all veterans, Principi's decision means that veterans with CLL who were in Vietnam during the war will get disability compensation of about \$2,300 a month, they won't have to pay copayments for health care to treat CLL and will have better access to the agencies' health services. Principi must draft rules and publish them in the Federal Register before the benefits can take effect.

Principi's decision to extend benefits pleased veterans groups who have continued to fight for research on the illnesses suffered by veterans exposed to the defoliants.

But Rick Wiedman, Vietnam Veterans of America government relations director, said the findings are incremental and large scale research should be funded to study problems in veterans.

"At the rate we are going, little by little but we are all going to be dead," Wiedman said.

*"It's just one more indication that service on the battlefield exposes men and women to dangers beyond bullets, shrapnel and missiles."*

— Anthony Principi  
Veterans Affairs Secretary

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**Sunday: 11 a.m. - midnight**  
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**NEWS IN BRIEF**

**Dallas man kills two home intruders**

DALLAS (AP) — A Dallas man shot and killed two intruders in his gated condominium complex Thursday.

The 29-year-old resident was shot in the arm and shoulder in the shootout, and was treated and released from Parkland Memorial Hospital, police say.

Police say the man called 911 around 9 a.m. to report hearing someone breaking in the side door of his townhouse. The resident was home with his wife and children at the time.

Police said the resident said he confronted a man in the living room, and the man opened fire. Authorities are looking for a third suspect who may have left the scene in a car.

**Woman, 3 children killed in trailer fire**

HERMLEIGH, Texas (AP) — An 18-year-old woman and her three children were killed early Thursday when they were trapped inside their mobile home as fire raced through officials said.

Four people escaped, but Desiree Flores, daughters ages 2 and 1, and a 1-month-old son could not get out.

Cy Posey, the fire marshal in Snyder, said Flores apparently was awakened by the smell of smoke and woke an 18-year-old man. He then tried to wake everyone up and clear the trailer, but he couldn't get back into the room where Flores and the children were. Posey said.

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