

Sharing the Scourge

When I was diagnosed with diabetes in 2001, my uncle, a World War II veteran, said that the VA had linked Type 2 diabetes with exposure to Agent Orange, a powerful dioxin used extensively to defoliate the jungle in Vietnam. This was news to me; we routinely sprayed the jungle foliage surrounding our A-Camps. I hadn't paid much attention to news reports in the 70s and 80s in which Vietnam veterans blamed Agent Orange for cancers and other horrendous medical conditions, as well as their children's birth defects.

But proving individual exposure was a problem for some veterans, depending on where they were stationed. The VA steadfastly claimed that there was no conclusive scientific evidence of a direct link between Agent Orange exposure and these illnesses. Yet several of the manufacturers of Agent Orange settled a product liability and class action lawsuit in 1984 filed on behalf of men and women who had served in Vietnam. It took another seven

years for the passage of the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which set forth the presumption of exposure to all Vietnam era veterans. That act directed the VA to compensate those veterans without the need for proof of exposure. The act detailed the many physical ailments caused by Agent Orange, notably ischemic heart disease, certain leukemias, multiple myeloma, Hodgkin's and Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Parkinson's disease, and prostate cancer, among others. Diabetes mellitus Type 2 was the first to be identified with the others, added only as it became obvious there was a connection with Agent Orange. The Agent Orange Benefits Act of 1996 addressed the offspring of poisoned veterans by adding spina bifida and associated physical birth defects, but it did not address developmental defects.

While building my case for VA disability compensation in 2006, I perused veterans' Internet forums to help me understand how to deal with the bureaucracy. Amidst the grouches of veterans unhappy with their ratings,

of War

Peter McShane

there was talk about children with autism, ADHD, OCD, and bipolar disorder. With further research, I found studies confirming that developmental delays, learning disabilities, and attention deficit and behavioral disorders have indeed been discovered in children and grandchildren of exposed veterans.

Growing up, my three sons displayed evidence of delayed development. My wife and I weren't alarmed at the time because children develop at their own pace. We held our two oldest back in the first grade because they needed time to "mature," as the school psychologist said. While our oldest son passed successfully into second grade, our middle child had difficulty grasping tasks and concepts. A battery of tests discovered he had developmental disorders, specifically problems with short-term memory, verbal expression, and social skills. So did our youngest child, but to a lesser extent. Ultimately, both of them received special educational preferences throughout primary and secondary school.

My grandchildren have also experienced developmental problems. One has been diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder, and three display some of the same symptoms as their fathers, i.e. problems with short-term memory, verbal expression, and social skills. It remains to be seen whether my five youngest grandchildren will have similar learning disabilities.

The VA intimates that additional birth defects beyond spina bifida may be covered under the Agent Orange Benefits Act, but the defects must have resulted in a permanent physical or mental disability, and it's up to the veteran to prove it.

How would I go about proving that my children and grandchildren may have been poisoned by Agent Orange? My war wounds detailed in my VA medical records clearly gave them all the proof they needed to support my claim for compensation, but I had to fight for it. Isn't it enough that veterans have been stricken by the scourge of war? Must our families carry that burden as well?