



PRESS RELEASE

Vietnam Veterans of America



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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Press Release

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Statement by VVA President John Rowan:
VVA Calls for Support of the Decision by VA Secretary
To Declare Presumptive Agent Orange/Dioxin
and
VVA Calls on the President and Congress to Fund Research Now,
And Not Wait for an Army to Die

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) -- There have been reports in the media recently in which some, including Senator Jim Webb, seem to question the legitimacy of service-connected disability compensation for exposure to Agent Orange/Dioxin on the battlefield, such as Type II diabetes mellitus and ischemic heart disease. Further, it appears that there is confusion on the part of some about how the process established by the Agent Orange Act of 1991 should and does work.

The facts of the matter are so clear that, after deliberation, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) restates our position which is dictated by those clear facts:

First, Public Law 102-4, the Agent Orange Act of 1991, was enacted to address a plethora of health issues in veterans that stemmed from our exposure to Agent Orange while serving in-country. Congress, in its collective wisdom, passed this legislation because of the severe impact exposure to dioxin was wreaking on the lives of tens of thousands of veterans.

Senator Webb is mistaken about the intent of the law, which is understandable, because Webb was not in the Congress at that time. By

the same token, no Senator or Member of Congress suggested, at the time of passage, that there should be any arbitrary or artificial limit placed on diseases covered, or on the numbers of veterans who might be affected, and, hence, covered. Rather, a process was set up to seek the level of association, if any, between exposure and the onset of specific diseases. Just as no one today would even think that we, as a nation, would cease treating and compensating our troops and veterans suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), simply because the incidence is far more prevalent among returning warriors than anyone might have imagined five years ago.

Second, we strongly support the actions of VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki in following both the letter and the spirit of Public Law 102-4, to conclude that the evidence analyzed by a distinguished panel from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences and published in the 2008 Biennial Review of Veterans and Agent Orange: Health Effects of Herbicides Used in Vietnam was compelling enough to declare Parkinson's disease, B cell leukemias, and ischemic heart disease as service-connected presumptive due to Agent Orange for those in the military who served in Vietnam (and along the demilitarized zone in Korea in 1968 and 1969).

Third, VVA can unequivocally state that the process set up by Congress under the Agent Orange Act continues to be the most objective and valid way of making decisions regarding environmental diseases of military service. These decisions should be scientific, not political. Any Secretary of the VA should adhere to the process, required by law, and follow the facts, as Secretary Shinseki has done.

Fourth, the evidence for inclusion of diabetes mellitus type II as a presumptive disease is very strong. It is true that people are more prone to develop type II diabetes as they age, but the facts of the matter are that Vietnam veterans are at least more than twice as likely to develop this disease as the non-veterans in our cohort group, when balanced for age, weight, exercise, and diet. The same is true of prostate cancer and other service-connected presumptive conditions.

This points, yet again, to the need for federal funding of additional research into the adverse health impacts on Vietnam veterans, on our children, and on our grandchildren, by respected independent scientific entities outside of the VA. This is just as evident today as it was twenty years ago. The clear need for such research is even more pressing today, given the number of Vietnam veterans who have died well before their time in the last twenty years, and the number who are continuing to die early because of the ravages resulting from exposure to Agent Orange/dioxin in Southeast Asia.

Lastly, there have been media reports that the amendment to Emergency Supplemental Appropriation by Senator Webb would delay the process, and thus delay the payment of justly due back compensation to affected

veterans, pushing off the time when veterans who are owed back compensation actually will receive their entitled compensation. This simply is not the case. Neither action by Senator Webb nor anyone else has thus far caused any action that will slow down the payment of claims as soon as the VA can work through the public rule-making process to get this accomplished.

We urge all affected Vietnam veterans and eligible surviving dependents to file claims for the newly presumptive diseases associated with Agent Orange: Parkinson's disease, B Cell leukemias, and ischemic heart disease. These diseases bring the total to 14 illness categories that entitle Vietnam veterans—and veterans who served along the demilitarized zone in Korea in 1968 and 1969—to health care and disability compensation. VVA also contends that many Vietnam-era veterans were also exposed in their service elsewhere in Southeast Asia during the war, including in Thailand and Laos, and aboard Navy vessels off the coast of Vietnam, as well as certain military bases located in the continental U.S. and its territories.

Among the other diseases recognized by the VA as presumptive to exposure to Agent Orange are diabetes mellitus (Type 2), non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, prostate cancer, and respiratory cancers (of the lung, bronchus, larynx, or trachea). Additional information about these and other presumptive diseases and long-term health care risks for veterans can be found at the Veterans Health Council web site, www.veteranshealth.org, and in the VVA Self-help Guide to Service-Connected Disability Compensation For Exposure to Agent Orange at www.va.org/Guides/AgentOrangeGuide.pdf

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Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the nation's only congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans and their families. VVA's founding principle is "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another."

