

Annual Report
Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses
U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs

December 1, 2003

1. Origin and Membership

The Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses was appointed by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi on January 23, 2002, pursuant to Public Law 105-368. Committee members who have served during this year are listed in Appendix A. The Secretary simultaneously appointed an advisory panel of experts, whose members are listed in Appendix B.

2. Committee Activities

During 2003, the Committee held three public meetings at VA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., on February 3-4, June 16-17, and October 27-28. Meetings featured scientific presentations by the principal investigators of studies whose work represents the most advanced research on the subject of Gulf War veterans' illnesses (GWI). Representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Defense (DOD), and other federal agencies were invited to attend the meeting and participate in discussions with presenting scientists along with Committee members. This structure has allowed Committee meetings to serve not only as a forum for the presentation of cutting-edge GWI research, but also as a vehicle for advancing that research and disseminating current information to government scientists. Meetings also featured regular updates on VA GWI administrative and scientific research activities and on additional published scientific research related to GWI.

Committee members have been active participants in all aspects of the committee's work. Meetings have been well-attended, with only one member absent from one meeting over the two years the Committee has convened. In addition, members have devoted substantial time to Committee business outside of meetings, reviewing scientific literature, participating in information-gathering meetings with experts and veterans, and working with regular VA staff and other federal

agencies. Members have also reviewed preliminary drafts of a report containing the Committee's major findings and recommendations, to be issued early in 2004.

The Committee has kept VA leadership, and in particular leadership in the Office of Research and Development (R&D), apprised of its findings on an ongoing basis. This has been accomplished through participation by VA's Chief Research and Development Officer in Committee meetings, attendance by administrative staff from VA's central office at Committee meetings, and ongoing communications between the Committee chairman and staff and VA leadership.

3. Support Activities

The administrative work of the Committee has been assisted by the Committee manager, Laura O'Shea, and members of her staff in Washington. Lea Steele, PhD, a member of the Committee, assumed the position of scientific director of the Committee staff in early September, when the Committee office was relocated from San Diego to the VA Medical Center in Topeka, Kansas. A full time administrative and research assistant will join the Topeka staff in December. Beatrice Golomb, MD, PhD, also a member of the Committee, continues to devote 40 percent of her time to the scientific work of the Committee from San Diego. Although the move required extra transition effort from VA staff in both Topeka and San Diego, these changes have significantly increased the scientific and administrative capabilities of the staff, while staying within the budget allocated for the Committee.

Conference calls were held with members of the expert panel and several members of the Committee to discuss research ideas generated by earlier individual calls with the experts. In addition, staff has conducted information-gathering calls with numerous other scientific experts and clinicians on an ongoing basis. Mr. Binns, Dr. Steele, and Dr. Golomb conducted a visit to VA's War-Related Injury and Illness Study Center in Washington, DC, to learn more about the Center's activities and to meet with the staff.

4. Accomplishments

The past twelve months have been an extremely important and promising period for Gulf War illness research. During this period, the results of newly-released studies have provided significant new insights into GWI, including studies that have fundamentally altered and expanded our understanding of these conditions. The studies were begun before the Committee was appointed, and so were not undertaken in response to Committee recommendations. However, these discoveries have further substantiated the new research directions recommended in the Committee's June, 2002, interim report. Several investigators first announced their research findings during presentations before the Committee, providing important new insights in areas such as objective indicators of neurological impairment in Gulf War illnesses, genetic variation associated with the development of Gulf War illnesses, and excess rates of birth defects and other pregnancy outcomes associated with Gulf War service. This allowed Committee members to formulate recommendations based on the most current information. It also allowed Committee meetings to serve the dual purpose of informing Committee deliberations while providing a forum for discussion and dissemination of study results to government researchers and VA officials.

Since the appointment of Nelda Wray, MD, as VA Chief Research and Development Officer, the Committee has been able to establish a solid working relationship with VA research officials. Dr. Wray has participated actively in the Committee's meetings, and has shown a sincere interest in implementing recommendations of the Committee with a sense of urgency. A presentation by Dr. Hermona Soreq of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem at the Committee's February meeting was quickly translated into a VA study whose preliminary results were presented at the October meeting. A number of other VA researchers also have reported in the past year on studies consistent with Committee recommendations, including Dr. Han Kang and colleagues' Washington-based longitudinal study of Gulf War veterans, and studies of birth defects and the effects of the anthrax vaccine; Dr. Eugene Oddone and colleagues' studies of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) at the VA Medical Center in Durham; and Dr. Roger

Madison and colleagues' initiation of molecular studies of the effects of neurotoxin exposures in Gulf War illnesses, also in Durham.

Dr. Wray announced at the October meeting that she intends to build a proactive portfolio of the most promising Gulf War illnesses research opportunities and that she would soon hire professional staff charged with developing and administering this effort. Committee members view these steps with great enthusiasm and expectation that Committee recommendations based on recent breakthroughs in research will be translated into VA research studies in 2004. Funding for these studies has already been made available through the \$20 million FY 2004 research initiative announced by the Deputy Secretary in October, 2002. Secretary Principi reinforced this initiative with a personal video message to all VA facilities and researchers in June, 2003. The Committee has urged that a program to identify treatments for Gulf War illnesses be given the highest research priority.

During the prior year, the Committee also recommended that the Department of Defense adopt standards of record keeping for deployed troops, based on Committee observations regarding "lessons learned" from the 1991 Gulf War. The Committee appreciated the efforts of the Secretary in conveying these concerns in a letter to the Secretary of Defense prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Iraq in March, 2003.

Through the identification of promising new research opportunities, the establishment of an effective working relationship between the Committee and VA R&D, and the availability of research funds, the requirements are in place for a rapid expansion of productive research in 2004. By the standard set forth in its charter, however, neither the work of the Committee nor the research programs of the federal government have yet to "improve the health of ill Gulf War veterans." Much work remains in moving the promise and research accomplishments of the past year into research and clinical programs that better the lives of veterans affected by unexplained illnesses resulting from their service in the Gulf War.

Appendix A

Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Committee Members

Chairman

James H. Binns, former Chairman, Parallel Design, Inc.; former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Phoenix, Arizona.

Committee Members

Nicola Cherry, MD, PhD, Professor and Chair, Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Beatrice A. Golomb, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Diego, California.

Joel C. Graves, Captain, U.S. Army, retired, Lacey, Washington.

Robert W. Haley, MD, Professor of Internal Medicine, Chief of Epidemiology, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas.

Marguerite L. Knox, MN, NP, Senior Sales Representative, Eli Lilly & Company, Hopkins, South Carolina.

William J. Meggs, MD, PhD, Chief of Toxicology, The Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

Pierre J. Pellier, MD, Vice President, Neurosciences, GlaxoSmith Kline, Wembley, Middlesex, England.

Stephen L. Robinson, Executive Director, National Gulf War Resource Center, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Steve Smithson, Assistant Director, Gulf War Task Force, American Legion, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Lea Steele, PhD, Research Associate Professor, College of Human Ecology, Kansas State University; Scientific Director, Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, Topeka, Kansas.

Consultant to the Committee

Jack Melling, PhD, Director, Karl Landsteiner Institute for Vaccine Development, Vienna, Austria.

Appendix B

Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Panel of Experts

Ira B. Black, MD, Chair, Dept of Neuroscience and Cell Biology, UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Piscataway, New Jersey.

Floyd E. Bloom, MD, Chair, Dept of Neuropharmacology, Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, California.

Joseph T. Coyle, MD, Eben S. Draper Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, Harvard Medical School, Belmont, Massachusetts.

Eugene M. Johnson, Jr., MD, Professor, Dept of Neurology, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.

M. Marsel Mesulam, MD, Director, The Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center, Northwestern University Medical School, Chicago, Illinois.

James J. Tuite, III, Chief Operating Officer, Chronix Biomedical, Inc., Benicia, California.

Bailus Walker, Jr., MD, MPH, Professor of Environmental and Occupational Medicine, College of Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC.