

Appendix D

September 30, 2005 Letter from Committee to Secretary Nicholson



Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses

September 30, 2005

The Honorable R. James Nicholson
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Committee deeply appreciates your making time in your busy schedule to participate in our meeting last week. We have learned from experience that the active interest of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is indispensable to our mission, and we are extremely grateful for your personal support.

We also welcome the participation of Dr. Kupersmith, Dr. O'Leary, and Dr. Goldberg. Their comments on how to build a viable Gulf War Illnesses (GWI) research program were constructive, and we look forward to working with them. The Committee wishes to commend the performance of Dr. Kang, whose study is referenced below, as an example of dedication among individual VA scientists in the field. Dr. Kang delayed his study by several months in order to incorporate questions suggested by the Committee regarding ill veterans' experience with treatments.

As your advisors, however, we are obliged to point out that the recent actions of the Department of Veterans Affairs with respect to GWI research present a very different picture.

The public commitment by the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs to fund up to \$15 million in new research in FY2005 has been disregarded. The Office of Research and Development has no plans to recover this lost year. ORD is padding GWI research totals by lumping in research initiated in previous years, general research on ALS, and additional topics not related to GWI.

The VA Environmental Agents Service has launched several misguided studies by the Institute of Medicine. When proposed, these studies were not reviewed by the Research Advisory Committee, as required by statute. By restricting the questions asked and/or the research to be considered, these studies have been designed to invite results that imply Gulf War illnesses are no different from the expected health consequences of any war.

Appointments to the new GWI merit review board, created by former Secretary Principi to ensure that proposed GWI studies were evaluated by scientists familiar with GWI research and related topics, have predominantly included VA researchers and other scientists with limited expertise in this area – perpetuating the situation the board was created to solve.

Meanwhile, VA field researchers describe the magnitude of the problem. Following your appearance Wednesday morning, Dr. Han Kang, director of the VA Environmental Epidemiology Service, reported the latest results from VA's ongoing major survey of Gulf War veterans and non-deployed veterans of the same era. The results show that fully 25 percent of Gulf veterans have chronic multisymptom illness over and above the background rate found in their non-deployed counterparts. This finding confirms the numbers of ill veterans indicated by earlier studies and highlighted in this Committee's 2004 Report.

In summary, the problems in VA Gulf War illnesses research management have only begun to be addressed. These problems reflect a lack of staff commitment observed over the course of the past three and a half years the Committee has been in existence. These problems need to be resolved before meaningful progress can be made in improving the health of ill veterans.

Very respectfully,

James Binns, chairman
Beatrice A. Golomb, MD, PhD
Joel C. Graves
Robert W. Haley, MD
Marguerite L. Knox, MN, NP
William J. Meggs, MD, PhD
Stephen L. Robinson
Steve Smithson
Lea Steele, PhD

Jack Melling, PhD, consultant