

# Heath: The Gulf War Syndrome Mystery

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THERE ARE EIGHTEEN pages in Dorland's *Medical Dictionary* defining the word "Syndrome." Simply put, it is a group or cluster of similar symptoms, complaints, and afflictions forming a common bond. It describes an illness or pathology of which much is yet unknown. (Medically speaking, an exact opposite would be Tuberculosis or "Strep Throat," where the etiology and treatment are well-known and defined.)

"Gulf War Syndrome" was never encountered in the past, and illustrates that the perils of modern warfare may differ markedly from traditional conflicts—including exposure to deadly toxins and chemicals.

Homecoming Persian Gulf Veterans, in significantly large numbers, are complaining of serious illnesses. Obviously, these same men and women were in prior excellent health.

Symptoms include memory loss, speech impairment, joint pains, digestive and respiratory disorders, chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, skin eruptions, and skin irritations sensitive to common chemicals, and some with progressive neuropathies so severe that they had to use ambulatory aids and wheelchairs as they testified before various congressional committees.

Of 697,000 armed forces personnel who went to the Gulf in 1990-1991, 29,000 have now signed complaints. More recent reports claim their numbers to be 40,000. Other armed force personnel deployed to other theaters of war or remaining in the United States have not shared these complaints or symptoms. The common bond is participation in the Gulf War.

Strangely, wives have complained that after their spouses returned, they suffered unusual vaginal and urinary problems and that the "semen often burned." But the most alarming fact: stillbirths, birth defects, and increased death among their offspring, abnormalities far beyond statistical expectation.

What caused these serious illnesses to Gulf War vets, their spouses and offspring? It appears there may be no single cause (such as in Agent Orange), but many possible causes, and research projects are under way to try to determine the answer.

Current knowledge points to one or more of the following: inhalation of ultra-fine sand particles, vaccinations against anthrax and botulism, prophylactic injections in case of chemical or biological warfare (British researchers claim some individuals were given 30-40 such injections), sand-flies, insecticides, contact with uranium paint sprayed on tanks, shells coated with depleted uranium, fallout from U.S. bombing of Iraqi nuclear facilities, pesticides sprayed on uniforms, smoke inhalation from raging fires, decontaminating agents and contact with chemical gases such as Sarine

and mustard gas.

The very diversity of probable causes may account for the variations in complaints. Sarine, for example, is the deadly gas used in the recent Tokyo subway attack. The possibility of nerve gas is of importance because this is what the U.S. government is most vehemently denying, possibly because 26 Desert Vets are suing eleven U.S. firms for a billion dollars for having sold this type of chemical to Iraq.

### **What the Vets Themselves Say**

60 Minutes TV has featured some of the Vets who have had serious complaints or illnesses. Colonel Herb Smith (a former veterinarian) pinpointed an event he himself witnessed of sudden and simultaneous death of horses and flies, implying the release of a deadly chemical.

Dr. Michael Johnson found 250 barrels of a chemical inside Kuwait which he and others repeatedly tested to be mustard gas. He even received a Medal of Honor. Yet later the Pentagon denied it was such a gas, claiming rather that it was fuming nitric acid.

Many claimed of hearing siren warnings of gas and donned cumbersome protective gear, and even tasted the bitter almond taste. Repeatedly they testified seeing animals, goats and camels instantly die before their eyes, dropping where they were standing. Yet the Pentagon and then Deputy Defense director John M. Deutsch (and now CIA director) continue to deny any connection with nerve gases.

Why the abnormal offspring—and how did we know of them? As in many exposes of deadly pollutants in our environment, the initial investigations and research came not from government or private corporations, but from ordinary individuals, often housewives, realizing that something unusual or terrible had happened in their neighborhood or work place.

Obvious reminders include the Karen Silkwood tragedy, and the Rockwell Plutonium industry in Rocky Flats, Colorado (the latter popularized in the movie “Dark Circle”).

At Rockwell, workers’ and housewives’ suspicions began with increased numbers of malignancies, and even increased death and disease of cattle in nearby grazing fields. Yet it took the government and the Rockwell Corporation 20 years to admit the truth.

And so it was with the Gulf War Syndrome. The wives of returning vets began comparing notes in beauty parlors, grocery stores, and neighbor to neighbor, that something unusual and terrible was happening to them and their families, and even more frightening, that something was being passed onto the next generation.

At Fort Bragg (Army’s 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division) in Fayetteville, ten babies have already died, some of unusual heart defects and even liver cancer, and three were stillborn. In Waynesboro, Mississippi (site of National Guard Quartermaster corps), 13 of 15 children born to returning vets suffer from some serious birth defect, including faulty immune systems that leave children defenseless against bacterial infections.

In four counties in Kentucky and Tennessee (home base of the Army’s 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division), and in three counties in Georgia (which support the Army’s 197<sup>th</sup> Division), and at Fort Hood, Texas, infant mortality has suddenly increased.

## **Scientific Explanation**

Dr. Ellen Silbergeld, a molecular toxicologist from the University of Maryland, stated in a congressional hearing that sperm in semen can be affected by toxic chemicals, causing genetic mutations to offspring.

It has long been known that toxic chemicals can decrease the number, vitality and quality of sperm. Very recently, persuasive studies of this have been reported in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Dr. Francis J. Waickman, an Akron, Ohio pediatrician specializing in the environment, has confirmed that birth defect statistics among Gulf War vets' children were ten times as many anomalies as in the normal population, and immune systems were affected.

Even the GAO (Government Accounting Office) has identified three factors in the war environment that may have caused "Reproductive Dysfunction" in soldiers: pesticides, oil fires and decontaminating agents.

## **What Has Been Done?**

It must be clearly understood that all scientific research to date (as distinct from independent journalistic investigations) on Gulf War Syndrome has been done only by the Pentagon.

Even the American Medical Association's journal criticizes this, calling for a more scientific and impartial analyses. Clinton has promised an independent body to research the problem.

The many records have not been opened, but the vets and their families are beginning to organize and collect their varied experiences and maladies.

A law was passed in November, 1994, giving the Veterans Administration authority to treat afflicted vets, even though their illness is not defined, and also to allow limited compensation. But no mention was given concerning spouses and offspring.

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**P.S.**

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