Translating Epidemiologic Evidence into Public Policy: Lessons from the Agent Orange Debate

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U.S. Congress
Public Law 102-4
(“Agent Orange Act of 1991”)

• Codified DVA compensation policy for Vietnam veterans
• Commissioned NAS to conduct scientific review
• Review to be updated every two years for 10 years
NAS Review
(Institute of Medicine)

- Assess strength of evidence for an association between herbicide exposure and disease
- Assess biological plausibility for these associations
- Assess risk in Vietnam veterans of herbicide exposure during the Vietnam war
- Research recommendations
IOM Review Process

- Committee selection process
- Peer reviewed literature
- Included all major herbicides used in Vietnam
  - 2,4,5-T
  - 2,4-D
  - Minor herbicides
  - Dioxin (2,3,7,8-TCDD) – a contaminant
- Occupational, environmental, and Vietnam Veterans exposures
- Toxicology (animal data) and human epidemiological studies
“Strength of Evidence” Assessment

- “Statistical” association
- Relied primarily on human epidemiological studies
- Categories of Association
  - Sufficient Evidence
  - Limited/Suggestive Evidence
  - Inadequate/Insufficient Evidence
  - Limited/Suggestive Evidence of No Association
Categories of Association (I)

• **Sufficient Evidence of an Association**
  
  “Evidence is sufficient to conclude that there is a positive association. That is, a positive association has been observed between herbicides and the outcome in studies in which chance, bias, and confounding could be ruled out with reasonable confidence.”

• **Limited/Suggestive Evidence of an Association**
  
  “Evidence is suggestive of an association between herbicides and the outcome but is limited because chance, bias, and confounding could not be ruled out with confidence.”
Categories of Association (II)

- **Inadequate/Insufficient Evidence to Determine Whether an Association Exists**
  
  “The available studies are of insufficient quality, consistency or statistical power to permit a conclusion regarding the presence or absence of an association.”

- **Limited/Suggestive Evidence of No Association**
  
  “Several adequate studies, covering the full range of levels of exposure that human beings are known to encounter, are mutually consistent in not showing a positive association between exposure to herbicides and the outcome at any level of exposure.”
IOM Committees’ Observations (I)

• “Attributable Risk” not applied (e.g. cigarette smoking and lung cancer)
• Exposures for Vietnam Veterans poorly defined
• Comprehensive list of Vietnam Veterans not available
• Biological Plausibility (Ah Receptor) -- YES
• Not a “dioxin report”
IOM Committees’ Observations (II)

- Risk in Vietnam Veterans is controversial
- Most compelling data came from occupational exposures
- Ranch Hand data
  - Important for birth defects and diabetes
  - Small numbers (900 plus Chemical Corps)
- Use of serum dioxin levels
  - Expensive
  - Variable half-life
  - Not a good surrogate for exposure to other herbicides
  - Exposure reconstruction efforts
Looming Issues

• Prostate Cancer in aging veterans
• Diabetes, lipid abnormalities and CVD
• “Latency” and lung cancer
• Risks at “near background” exposures
DVA Policy Decisions

- Compensate Vietnam Veterans for all conditions in the “Sufficient Evidence” category
- Compensate Vietnam Veterans for conditions in the “Limited/Suggestive Evidence” category
- No consideration of exposure risk or competing risks (e.g. cigarette smoking)
DVA Policy Constraints (Legislative Mandates)

- “Exposure” determined by Vietnam service
- Disease-specific determination of “Service-relatedness”
- “Legal”, not scientific definition of “Association”
- “Association” = “Causation”
Conclusions

• Epidemiologic data/reports will be used by policy makers
• Policy options are often constrained by “non-scientific” forces and influences
• Understanding the “rules” for policy making may assist epidemiologists to more effectively communicate their results and limitations
• Don’t take it personally…