

The Medical and Health Legacy of the Vietnam War

The new history now being written

IT'S half way there.

Historian Dr Peter Yule has two more years to complete a new Official History volume on the medical and health legacy of the Vietnam War.

The volume will, of course, tell the story of the Agent Orange controversy anew but also the story of the scourge of PTSD and other psychological damage from the trauma of war.

The Agent Orange Controversy

Readers will know that the Agent Orange story for veterans started in the very late 1970s when evidence emerged from the US that exposure could cause cancer.

For a long time the government simply denied that veterans had even been exposed.

The veterans' own research, however, found to the contrary. They demanded the Government give them the full story.

They also demanded an acknowledgement from the Repatriation System that exposure to Agent Orange may have been harmful. The Repatriation Commission, however, denied any link between exposure and cancer.

Certainly there were good scientific studies finding no link between Agent Orange and cancers. But there were also good studies in which a link was established.

Repatriation law gave (and gives) war veterans the 'benefit of the doubt'. And on this question there certainly was doubt. The campaigning veterans believed, therefore, that the Repatriation Commission should have been acknowledging the link for Vietnam veterans.

Despite this argument, the Repatriation Commission remained unmoved.

So the veterans campaigned for a Royal Commission that would find more evidence, which, combined with giving veterans the 'benefit of the doubt' as the law demanded, would make it impossible for the Repatriation Commission to remain in denial.

But whilst the Royal Commission found that, under Repatriation law, two categories of cancer could be attributed to exposure whilst in Vietnam, and whilst the Royal Commission castigated the Repatriation Commission for previously evading the law and Parliamentary intentions, the Repatriation Commission dug in, refusing to budge.

The disappointed campaigning veterans then turned to the appeals tribunals, noting they seemed to have a much greater respect for the law. In the early 1990s appeal after appeal was won.

Still the Repatriation Commission resisted.

In 1993, the US Academy of Science submitted a meta-study (a summary of all available studies) to the US Congress that linked, at a high standard of proof, Agent Orange to several cancers.

The game was up.

The Repatriation Commission was humbled into submission.

In 1994, Volume 3, the medical volume, of the Official History of the Vietnam War was published.

Included in it was an account of the Agent Orange controversy by Professor FB Smith. He claimed that the campaigning veterans had no case and that they were dishonest and motivated by greed.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

As we have explained, the veterans' contention had clearly been upheld by the Royal Commission.

As for 'motivation', the veterans' submission to the Royal Commission had not asked for additional compensation for Agent Orange injuries, only that claims be treated fairly under the existing system. This was hardly 'greedy'.

Twenty years of campaigning to have this inaccurate and unjustly insulting history re-written succeeded in 2013 when the War Memorial Council commissioned a scoping study to determine whether an new account was warranted.

The scoping study heavily criticised FB Smith's account. Consequently, the War Memorial Council commissioned Dr Peter Yule to write a new volume of the Official History on the medical and health aspects of the Vietnam War.

The PTSD Controversy

PTSD and other psychological illnesses are a major legacy of the Vietnam War. Many thousands of Vietnam veterans and members of our families have been damaged by this blight.

Dr Peter Edwards was the Official Historian overseeing the writing of the nine volumes of the Official History of the Vietnam War.

He fiercely supported FB Smith's version of the Agent Orange controversy and was disparaging of the campaigning veterans. He wrote:

'The focus on Agent Orange served not to assist but to delay and to obstruct constructive action towards remedying, or paying compensation for, a wide range of diseases suffered by veterans and their families, to which war service might have contributed. The most important was probably post-traumatic stress disorder...'

Once again, nothing could be further from the truth.

The same veterans campaigning for recognition of the possible harmfulness of Agent Orange, were also campaigning for a counselling service to be set up.

It was this group, led by Phill Thompson, that, in 1980 opened its own Counselling Service at its Parramatta office employing three qualified volunteer counsellors. One of the counsellors, Lianne Grearson (later to join the VVCS) wrote up case studies that formed a telling part of a submission by the VVAA to the government. This submission, as well as the general campaigning of the veterans, convinced the government to establish the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS).

Between January 1981 and January 1982, Repatriation Commissioner Major General Alby Morrison and Phill Thompson toured Australia conducting interviews to recruit staff. In January 1982, Phill Thompson, in recognition of his group's part in its establishment, gave a speech in Adelaide at the first Counselling Centre opening.

In other words, the campaigning veterans, far from causing a delay and obstruction to remedying the problem of post-traumatic stress, expedited the availability of treatment and compensation.

Our Hope

Our hope is that the new volume of the Official History will set the record straight. ■



Historian Dr Peter Yule