

Australian sailors misled about anthrax vaccinations for Iraq war

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27 February 2004

The Howard government has been caught out in yet another gross deception relating to the war on Iraq. Evidence emerged last weekend showing that the government and the top defence brass deliberately withheld information from Australian military personnel about the effects of the anthrax vaccinations they were given in March 2003, just prior to the war being launched.

About 52 sailors, concerned about the risks associated with the vaccine, refused to be inoculated. Sailors had not even been informed that the vaccination was required until their ships had left for Iraq. At that time, Defence Minister Robert Hill assured them that the anthrax vaccine was safe and that side effects would be minimal, something akin to mild flu-like symptoms.

The government and the military insisted that the vaccinations were essential because of fears that Saddam Hussein's regime would use biological and chemical weapons. Even so, 11 sailors aboard the HMAS Kanimbla and the HMAS Darwin continued to refuse the vaccinations, whereupon they were removed from their posts and sent back to Australia.

What Hill did not reveal to the young men and women being sent to war, or to the public at large, was the contents of a confidential defence department document. This showed that 75 percent of the Australian troops sent to Afghanistan in 2001, including elite SAS personnel, had suffered such severe side effects from the vaccine that the inoculation program was secretly suspended in November 2001 for two months.

According to the document, some soldiers experienced "swelling and pain severe enough for (them) not to be able to lift their arms". The "flu-like" symptoms proved to be anything but mild, causing some troops to be placed on sick leave for 24 to 48 hours. Defence doctors concluded that the effects were serious enough to endanger military personnel in the field.

In fact, a briefing note from defence doctors to the

Australian Defence Force Chief Admiral Chris Barrie on November 15, 2001, warned they were concerned that the adverse reaction "could be operationally significant if units concerned receive their (anthrax) vaccinations after being deployed". Even this warning was withheld from the sailors.

The document also revealed that the causes of the adverse reaction among troops deployed to Afghanistan were not established and that subsequent testing ruled out any fault with the particular batches of vaccine from the United Kingdom. This did not stop the government insisting that the military personnel sent to Iraq be given the same shots.

Another suppressed document demolished official attempts to downplay the number of sailors who suffered severe reactions to the anthrax vaccine. Asked last week during a Senate estimates hearing if he had any concerns about the vaccine, Defence Health Service director-general Air Commodore Tony Austin curtly replied: "No we have not". Yet an email sent to Austin by a senior defence doctor, Colonel Stephen Rudski, last June confirmed that of the 251 personnel aboard HMAS Darwin, "97 completed an adverse reaction pro-forma—giving an adverse reaction rate of 38 percent".

Speaking on ABC television's "7.30 Report" on February 23, Simon Bond, one of the sailors who refused to be inoculated, confirmed the severe impact of the vaccine on sailors. Bond said he knew of two shipmates who had become so ill after being vaccinated that they had been unable to work. Before being removed from the ship, he had witnessed one of his friends "curled up (on the ship's) workshop floor" with his head between his legs.

Bond described the government's withholding of vital information about the ill effects suffered by troops sent to Afghanistan as "unprofessional" and "immoral". Asked if he felt let down by the Navy, Bond replied: "Betrayed is

probably a better word". Bond eventually left the navy after being subjected to pressure, including threats to impede his service career.

Janet Sceaton, the wife of Lorne Sceaton, another navy man who refused the vaccination, told the ABC interviewer that her husband felt he had been "ambushed by the navy". She said he was willing to do the whole deployment but "he would not accept an anthrax vaccination".

The suppression of the contents of the confidential report makes a mockery of the official claim that the sailors were not coerced into agreeing to the vaccinations. Without being in full possession of the facts, how was it possible for those being given the inoculations to make an informed choice?

Air Commodore Austin this week admitted that sailors heading to war in Iraq may have felt compelled to take the vaccine. "It could certainly be construed as taking away people's freedom of choice," he told a Senate committee. Austin maintained that the "potential degree of coercion" was unintended, but as the treatment afforded to Bond and Sceaton demonstrates, the pressure applied to sailors was quite deliberate.

Austin last week attempted to justify the military's decision to withhold the health warnings from sailors by saying that making the information available "would have been counterproductive". It "would have increased anxiety levels among our people (who were) already going into a highly demanding, highly stressful environment".

From what has emerged, the "anxiety levels" of the sailors were the military brass's last concern. The only reason why it would have been "counterproductive" to provide sailors with all the facts is that it would have further fuelled resistance to the vaccinations and impeded the Howard government's rush to commit troops to the invasion of Iraq.

The revelations raise the question of what else is being kept under wraps. Do the government and the military chiefs have further information about the impact of the anthrax vaccine on troops under battlefield conditions or data on the longer-term health effects?

Questions have already surfaced about the mounting number of pneumonia cases and hundreds of unexplained deaths and illnesses among US soldiers serving in Iraq. Many soldiers and their families have raised concerns that the casualties may be related to the cocktail of anthrax and other inoculations given to troops, and accused the Pentagon of conducting a cover-up.

The widow of one soldier, Michael L Tosto, who died suddenly last July of a "pneumonia-like illness," said she now strongly believed that his death was related to the vaccinations. Other US soldiers, like Air Force sergeant Neal Erickson, claim they became extremely ill with respiratory problems immediately after being given anthrax vaccinations.

Army Specialist Rachael Lacy died in April 2003 in Rochester, Minnesota after being hospitalised with pneumonia as her unit was being prepared for deployment to the Middle East. After an autopsy, the Minnesota coroner found that the smallpox and anthrax vaccinations she had been given were possible contributing factors in her death.

Last December, US District Court Judge Emmet Sullivan issued an injunction halting the program of compulsory anthrax vaccinations for US military forces. Six unnamed US Defence Department personnel petitioned the court, contending that the vaccine was experimental and that soldiers were being used as "guinea pigs". The stay was overturned in January after the Defence Department claimed the program complied with all legal requirements.

The indifference and deception displayed by the US and Australian governments toward the welfare of the troops sent to Iraq follow the pattern that emerged after the 1991 Gulf War. Thousands of military personnel came home complaining of symptoms associated with what is now known as "Gulf War syndrome," only to be confronted with years of official denial, deceit and cover-up.



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