

More inconsistencies in account of second UK novichok poisoning

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Yesterday evening in the UK saw the release of reports from Salisbury District Hospital that, “We have seen a small but significant improvement in the condition of Charlie Rowley. He is in a critical but stable condition, and is now conscious.”

Rowley is the second victim of a reported poisoning by a “novichok” nerve agent. His partner, Dawn Sturgess, died Sunday.

Events since the two reportedly came into contact with a nerve agent on June 29 have piled questions on top of questions.

Metropolitan police assistant commissioner Neil Basu claimed on Monday that Sturgess and Rowley received a high dose of novichok as a result of handling a container of some sort holding the nerve agent. The pair’s “reaction is so severe it resulted in Dawn’s death and Charlie being critically ill. This means they must have got a high dose.”

Rowley’s house in Amesbury, Sturgess’ Salisbury homeless hostel and the nearby Queen Elizabeth Gardens—along with several other sites—have been cordoned off and are being searched by around 100 police officers for the container, which has still not been identified in the 11 days since June 30, when they became ill and were hospitalised.

Twenty-one individuals—including police officers, hospital staff and members of the public—have been medically assessed over fears of exposure to the poison. All have been discharged.

Each development only adds to the opaque and contradictory descriptions of “novichok” first given during the Skripal affair. Dr. Mirzayanov, who claims to have worked on production of the nerve agent, states that it would have decomposed in the four months since the Salisbury events, raising doubts that it relates to Sturgess’ death. Leonid Rink, another claimed creator,

agrees that the substance would have disintegrated.

But another scientist who also claims to have worked on novichok, Vladimir Uglev, now describes the substance as “very stable”, saying “it won’t decompose.”

“The substance can absorb itself into any soft surface, whether trees, leather or park benches. From there it can be absorbed onto people’s skin with all the consequences,” he stated.

The Office for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) report into the Skripal case raised serious questions as to whether a novichok weapon of the kind that has been described even exists.

Given these conflicting statements, by individuals whose motivations are themselves unclear, how a novichok nerve agent is alleged to have come into contact with Rowley and Sturgess, if such a substance was ever even present, is open to serious question.

If novichok is capable of lingering and being absorbed into various surfaces and was found in greatest concentration on the pairs’ hands, then one must ask how it did not end up more widely spread. As far as is known, none of the friends who were with Rowley and Sturgess at various points have even been screened for contamination or symptoms. Ben Milsom, whose van Rowley travelled in a few hours before he was taken to hospital, has even been told to hang on to items cleared from the van before it was sold and later quarantined. “I’ve told the police and the health authority about it but they have just told me not to touch it and leave it there”, he told *The Sun*.

Other questions raised include: What item is supposed to have contaminated Rowley and Sturgess? Where was it stored to enable such a high concentration of nerve agent, and how did it come to be there?

The Ministry of Defence Porton Down chemical

weapons research centre lies midway between Salisbury and Amesbury and is just as capable of producing novichok as it is of analysing it.

No official consideration is being given to this. Instead, the main presentation is that the discarded agent was picked up and shared between Sturgess and Rowley somewhere in the Queen Elizabeth Gardens. This would have been in the afternoon of Friday 29 June, the day before they fell seriously ill.

The theory advanced by the government, now more stridently by Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson, is that “Russia has committed an attack on British soil which has seen the death of a British citizen.”

The specifics of the accusation, therefore, must include the assumption that, following or prior to an attempt on the Skripals’ lives, the assassins left dangerous and potentially incriminating evidence in a nearby public place. Whatever this item was, moreover, it was capable of applying a “high dose” of poison to Sturgess and Rowley, considerably more effectively than by supposedly smearing it on a doorknob during the intended assassination of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

None of these hypotheses appear credible. Indeed, the basis of this explanation was undermined by the admission of Home Secretary Sajid Javid that the sample of the substance taken from Sturgess’ blood was not enough to confirm whether it came from the same batch as the substance alleged to have poisoned the Skripals. This leaves the “discarded container” of highly concentrated agent thesis, which must have been on their hands as well as in their blood, without any substantial justification.

The seizure and quarantining of a car in Swindon, some 40 miles away from Amesbury, opens a new unexplained chapter. The two vehicles quarantined in connection with this case prior to the car were the bus in which Sturgess and Rowley traveled from Salisbury to Amesbury and the van in which Rowley traveled around town the next day. What the pair’s connection with the car might be has not been revealed. If there is no such connection, then that would suggest another party to the events of last week whose involvement has not been disclosed.

Also unexplained by the government or police, hospitals across a number of counties in southern England were briefed on how to deal with nerve agent poisoning a few days before Sturgess’ death.

According to the *Daily Mirror*, “The dossier circulated was written five days after mother-of-three Dawn, 44, and partner Charlie Rowley were contaminated” and reports a fear that more “novichok cases” may occur.

This is at odds with the “low risk to the public” message which has been put out to Amesbury and Salisbury residents. It suggests that an even wider section of the population is considered potentially at risk. Such a situation would hardly fit with accusations of a Russian operation against a specific individual. What events really prompted this advice to be distributed?

A coroner’s report on Sturgess’ death is currently being written up. Former British ambassador Craig Murray has raised a serious matter that has to be addressed if there is any hope of uncovering the truth of the events. He writes in his latest blog post, “I trust that Dawn Sturgess will get a proper and full public inquest in accordance with normal legal process, something which was denied to David Kelly. I suspect that is something the government will seek to delay as long as possible, even indefinitely.”

Dr. Kelly worked at Porton Down, and his suspicious death on July 17, 2003, officially by suicide, followed criticisms he made of the “dodgy dossier” used to justify pre-emptive war against Iraq. In 2010 it was revealed that the government had sealed medical records relating to his death for 70 years.

A striking feature of the latest chapter of the novichok saga is how restrained in their commentary newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* have been, compared with their blaring accusations against Moscow following the poisoning of the Skripals. This does not suggest a retreat from their anti-Russian stance, but rather a recognition that the British authorities have yet to get their story straight.



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