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Agent Orange's lethal legacy: The next generation

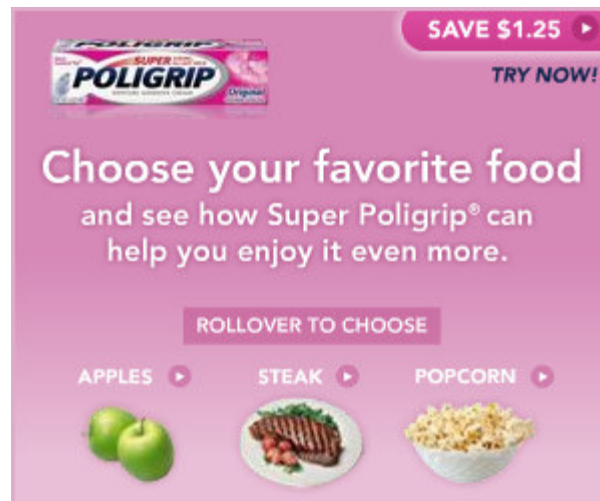
Children of male veterans face a tougher fight for help from government

By Tim Jones

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HAUGHTON, La.



Ted Hutches is hobbled by leg-swelling cellulitis, cancer and nerve disorders that have left his hands and feet numb and prevented him from working for the past 30 of his 71 years.

His two adult daughters, Mary Beth Hoffman and Sherrie Hutches, are hampered by the same nerve maladies as well as hip and knee joints that pop out of place, causing each woman to fall down with disturbing frequency. Born without a completely formed left hip, Hoffman has undergone 18 knee surgeries since 1992 and cannot work.

Hutches, who was exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam in 1965, was declared 100 percent disabled by the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs in 2002 and receives

compensation.

His daughters get nothing.

"I was told I'd be wasting my time," Hoffman, 41, said of her inquiry about filing a disability claim with Veterans Affairs.

Hutches' daughters represent an ongoing argument over the extent to which serious health problems in the children and grandchildren of veterans can be linked to Vietnam-era defoliants.

Children of male and female Vietnam veterans both report a variety of birth defects, including loose joints, bowel and bladder disorders, bone abnormalities, hearing loss, reproductive problems, behavior disorders and abnormal skin conditions.

Although the VA provides disability compensation for 17 birth defects in the children of female veterans exposed to defoliants, only one -- spina bifida -- is covered for male veterans' offspring. The VA says research has demonstrated a higher risk of birth defects for young women exposed to dioxin but has not settled the question for children of exposed men.

Some veterans' advocates say the disparity stems from the government's desire to avoid a potentially huge financial liability: Only about 10,000 of the 3 million Vietnam veterans are women.

"This issue is not about the science, it's about the economics and the politics," said Betty Mekdeci, executive director of the Florida-based Birth Defect Research for Children, which keeps data on birth outcomes from veterans of wars since Vietnam.

Data from Mekdeci's registry suggest that children of Vietnam veterans are more likely than other vets' children to develop cancer and suffer from learning disabilities and behavior disorders. But proving the case for compensation will require comprehensive studies that have long been delayed.

As a sergeant in the Army's Chemical Corps, Hutches knew more than most soldiers about Agent Orange. But he had no idea what it could do to him or his family.

Hutches spent his one year in Vietnam filling trucks, helicopters and backpacks with the defoliant, which was sprayed on the vegetation surrounding Phuoc Vinh, a military outpost about 30 miles northeast of Saigon.

"It was a continuous process," Hutches said of the spraying.

When a 5,000-gallon truck returned from a spraying mission, Hutches would direct it to a

nearby river to be filled with water. Then soldiers at the base camp would line up to get showers from the truck's horizontal sprayers -- the same ones used for Agent Orange.

"Everyone tried to be first in line," said Hutches, who called showers the next best thing in the jungle to food. "I probably had three or four a week."

A year after returning to the U.S., Hutches' legs began to swell, until eventually he could no longer wear combat boots. Mary Beth was born in 1968, then Sherrie in 1970, each with birth defects.

He filed his first claim with the VA in 1978. It took 24 years of filings and appeals for the VA to declare him 100 percent disabled. He shakes his head over the fate of his daughters. "Their whole life has been destroyed by this," he said.

"It wasn't my war," said Hoffman, who lives with her husband and daughter in this small town of tall pines near Shreveport.

"It wasn't my choice. I've never blamed my dad, but it's not right."

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