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Johnson Battles Defense Department Over Anthrax Vaccine

Fights To End Soldiers' Dishonorable Discharge

WASHINGTON, DC — U.S. Rep. Nancy Johnson urged the Defense Department Friday to end its practice of dishonorably discharging service members for declining to subject themselves to the potentially harmful anthrax vaccine.

In a strongly worded letter sent to Defense Secretary William Cohen, Johnson said "I am writing to express my concern with the Department of Defense's Anthrax Vaccination Program and my vehement opposition to dishonorably discharging service members who leave because they fear the health consequences of the mandatory anthrax vaccine."

In December 1997, the Secretary of Defense announced that all U.S. forces would be inoculated against the potential use of anthrax on the battlefield. To date, no studies have been done to determine the optimum number of doses of the vaccine, nor has the long-term safety of the vaccine been determined, according to the General Accounting Office.

"Every soldier is well aware of the dangers that come with serving in the military," Johnson said. "But I doubt they ever expected their government would force them to take a vaccine that has unknown long-term effects."

As of July 14, 1999, more than 300,000 service members had received at least one dose of the vaccine. After vaccinating 150,000 Gulf War troops, the Defense Department had a unique pool of subjects to study, but due to poor record keeping no large scale research has been conducted.

"Clearly more research is necessary about the vaccine's long-term effects," Johnson said. "I've co-sponsored legislation to impose a moratorium on the vaccine program until further reviews can be done by the National Institutes of Health."

In testimony before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs and International Relations, Lieutenant Richard Revet, Health Care Integrator for the Flight Medicine Clinic at Dover Air Force Base, stated that some of the reported symptoms of exposure to vaccine include joint pain, memory impairment, "grayouts," and cardiac problems.

"Forcing our men and women in uniform to choose between this vaccine and their careers fosters distrust and erodes morale," Johnson said. "We shouldn't continue down this path until we have more conclusive evidence."

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