
Defense Report

AUSA



The National Cancer Institute Gives the Army a Bruise it Doesn't Deserve

During the war in Vietnam U.S. Army medics discovered that a common anti-malaria drug is ineffective against a rare form of the disease found in limited areas of the country. After closely-controlled experiments with a drug, Dapsone, already licensed by the Food and Drug Administration the Army began issuing a single 25 milligram tablet a day to troops in the affected areas. The treatment was effective and the incidence of the rare and often fatal strain of malaria was greatly reduced.

Recently, however, the National Cancer Institute issued a charge that Dapsone caused cancer in rats. The charge was given wide publicity to a public inculcated with fear of cancer and the Army got another bruise. Little attention was paid to the Army's defense. By the time it was made the news value of the original cancer-scare story had faded and few editors wanted to revive it.

But there are a whole regiment of facts that stand in the Army's defense and condemn the alarmist report from the cancer institute. First of all, Dapsone has been used at the Federal Leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana since the early 1960's with no evidence of causing cancer in humans. At the time the Army conducted its experiments the drug had been in use at Carville for five years.

Second, and probably most telling, the amount of Dapsone administered to the test rats at the cancer institute was equal to a dose of 320 of the 25 milligram tablets each day instead of the single one actually taken by the troops.

Also, the test animals were exposed to Dapsone throughout their entire life cycle, rather than for the comparatively brief time any military personnel took the drug in Vietnam. Only male rats of a strain known to be susceptible to tumors developed cancers after exposure to Dapsone while, at the same time, a control group of rats not taking Dapsone all developed tumors, more than a third of them malignant.

The Cancer Institute must do its job of warning against substances that might cause the dreaded disease. It has worked effectively to warn against the threat from cigarette smoking and has made some good points following examination of food additives. In view of the highly emotional nature of public reaction to cancer, however, it should be faulted for raising an alarm over Dapsone on the basis of such weak evidence.