

Detrick scientists bring out safety record in research

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By ROLLIE ATKINSON
Staff Writer

The nation was at war in 1943 when an urgent call went out to scientists and researchers to develop and prepare a new and lethal form of warfare.

Born in a time of national crisis, chemical biological warfare today finds itself under a critical public eye.

Scientists involved in important biological research point to the many peaceful uses and discoveries made at Fort Detrick and other governmental labs while critics question what value was placed on human lives during the three decades in which research progressed beneath the heaviest of secret classifications.

The scientists have an excellent safety record and a long list of scientific accomplishments to support their view.

Critics point to the recent disclosures

of deaths and series of drug tests made on unknowing human subjects.

In July, it was reported, following the release of the Rockefeller Report on the CIA, that former Ft. Detrick scientist Frank R. Olson committed apparent suicide after suffering a nervous breakdown from LSD secretly given to him by CIA personnel.

Last Friday, the Army confirmed three other deaths which had occurred at Detrick between 1951 and 1964. All of the deaths, according to the Army, were caused by work-related contaminations.

What was not reported, and what scientists in the highly dangerous field of research are most sensitive about, was the overall safety record of the Detrick germ warfare lab.

According to a safety report entitled, "Causal Factors in Microbiological Laboratory Accidents and Infections," written by a former Detrick employe,

Dr. G. Brigg Phillips, the local facility recorded 9.06 lab infections per one million man-hours between 1954 and 1962.

Figures published in 1968 by the National Safety Council listed occupations at Ft. Detrick to be much safer than, say, occupations in the printing, electrical, federal civilian and other vocational fields.

One former Detrick scientist pointed out that as many accidents, some fatal, occurred during the two-year construction of Gov. Thomas Johnson High School than occurred at Detrick over a much longer period of time.

Safety precautions at Detrick were many and strict, according to former employes.

Workers were encouraged to report even the most minor of accidents and

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breakage. In all, between 1954 and 1962, 3,330 such incidents were reported.

People were involved in only half of the total incidents and, in only one-sixth of the cases, were individuals forced to lose time from their jobs because of illness or injury.

According to the Phillips' report, 410 persons out of a total of 530 who were hospitalized during the period suffered from infections or contaminations received in the Detrick labs.

Reports of the recently disclosed deaths of three Detrick employees claim base officials hesitated in at least one case to admit an individual into the Detrick hospital and left him in the public Frederick Memorial Hospital for one day.

In both of the other two cases, private physician consultation and admittance to a public hospital also preceded admission into Detrick's hospital.

However, former workers, while not able to account for the apparent laxity of usual strict regulations and precautions, recall other incidents where utmost precautionary measures were taken.

When one lab technician reported to work with what he described as a "hangover," he immediately was confined to the base hospital with symptoms of bloodshot eyes, nausea and queasiness. Tests proved he drank too much and nothing more.

Lab workers worked in a system of double doors, air locks, and ultra-violet rays and took at least four hot showers daily with germicidal soap.

Recent criticism and Congressional inquiries have centered more on tests involving human subjects and links with the CIA than on safety records.

As former Detrick employees testified before Congress last week and with information discovered along with the Olson death and the three disclosed

deaths by the Army on Friday, certain parts of the secret cloak under which much of the laboratory research progressed have been torn away.

The presence of the Central Intelligence Agency and its vested interests in Detrick research was made more clear during testimony last week when one former employe revealed that nearly all of the blueprints to projects he was working on for the Army were also forwarded to the CIA.

In the case of the missing shellfish toxin, it was finally disclosed that a portion of the deadly agent was returned to the CIA rather than included in an inventory of chemical and biological agents scheduled for destruction in accordance with presidential orders.

Stores of war games played in such places as New York City's subways and the Food and Drug Administration's headquarters, in which Detrick personnel participated, as disclosed on Capitol Hill last week, also serve to add perspective to what went on at Detrick.

War critics, who from time to time held anti-war vigils at Detrick's main gate, point with scorn at the many anti-person agents and plant defoliants invented and perfected at Detrick.

On the other hand, Detrick scientists may point with pride at the many vaccines, antibiotics and plant insecticides developed during the course of their experimentations.

Frequently, Detrick scientists were requested by the Public Health Service and the Center for Communicable Diseases to assist with, or lead, in investigations seeking cures and causes of epidemic causing diseases.

Fort Detrick's role in chemical biological warfare was phased out in 1972 in compliance with orders from President Nixon, who traveled here to make the announcement that Detrick

would be transformed into a center for cancer research.

A global ban on chemical biological warfare was agreed to by the United States and the Soviet Union and new developments and deployments were supposedly stopped.

Laboratory samples of several agents developed for war use but said to also possess peaceful purposes reportedly have been saved, according to testimony before Congress.

The secret germ warfare effort began in the midst of a national mentality

concerned with 'commie' and 'red' scares, and primary concerns were placed on outdoing the enemy in preparedness and first strike capability.

Now into the age of detente, apparently leaving the days of the cold war behind, a public from which many secrets were withheld for nearly 30 years, has now begun to ask many questions.

Hence the recent flourish of hearings, reports and reexamination of old incidents.