

DEPARTING NATIONAL GUARD TROOPS WON'T RECEIVE ANTHRAX VACCINATIONS

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Members of the Connecticut Air National Guard headed for the Persian Gulf in September will not have to get controversial anthrax shots due to a shortage of the vaccine.

The Pentagon announced Monday that it will slow down administration of the vaccine across the country for a third time because of the shortage.

The news drew criticism from two former Guard pilots who were forced out of the 103rd Fighter Wing in Windsor Locks in early 1998 after their investigation raised serious questions about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. Maj. Thomas Rempfer and Russell Dingle, now in the Air Force Reserve, said their investigation foresaw the vaccine's dangers, yet they were punished.

"I'll sleep better at night if the anthrax vaccine manufacturer ever becomes certified by the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] and soldiers receive protection worthy of their service, but this has not been the case since the program's inception," Rempfer said.

But the majors are pleased the Connecticut Guard will be spared the shots.

"This latest program scale-back protects the Guard from receiving adulterated doses produced by a manufacturer we discovered was shut down by the FDA over three years ago," Dingle said.

Maj. Gen. William A. Cugno, commander of the Connecticut National Guard, said Tuesday that about 90 of the 400 personnel from the 103rd Fighter Wing would have needed the shots because they will serve more than 30 days overseas.

Cugno said Tuesday the slowdown means that none of them will be given the shots. It did not, however, change his mind about the status of Dingle and Rempfer, who have unsuccessfully sought reinstatement, he said.

The vaccine manufacturer, BioPort Inc. of Lansing, Mich., hasn't produced its own supplies of the vaccine because it failed FDA inspections. BioPort is using old supplies of the vaccine, aimed at protecting service members from an airborne biological warfare agent, manufactured by the state of Michigan's health department. BioPort may be able to produce new lots of vaccine within the first few months of next year, said the Pentagon.

Last year, the Defense Department restricted vaccine use to service members located in areas considered at "high risk" of terrorism or enemy attack. Monday the department announced it will limit the vaccinations to certain special-mission units, vaccine researchers and those involved in congressionally mandated studies of the drug. Troops assigned to hot spots overseas, such as the Connecticut Guard members, will use antibiotics instead of the vaccine if attacked.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who asked the Pentagon to halt the program until officials can show the vaccine is safe, effective and properly licensed, said he intends to work with state and federal officials to prevent use of the vaccine.

More than 511,000 service members have been vaccinated with more than two million doses of the vaccine since March 1998, when the drug became mandatory. The inoculations resulted in 1,578 federal complaints of adverse reactions, ranging from swollen arms and minor rashes to long-term auto-immune disorders. Usually, only 10 percent of those with adverse reactions to any vaccine report them, the FDA says.

Scores of service people have declined to take the vaccine and have been disciplined or expelled because of that stance. Other pilots in the Guard and reserve units have resigned rather than take the shots.