

OFFICIALS URGE AMNESTY IN ANTHRAX VACCINE REFUSALS

Hartford Courant

Jun 6, 2002

THOMAS D. WILLIAMS

Dozens of federal and state officials are calling for amnesty for hundreds of people who were punished or drummed out of the military for refusing to participate in a mandatory anthrax vaccine program that has since been all but dropped.

U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4th District, supports amnesty, as do other state officials, including Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.

"We have lost hundreds and hundreds of good men and women who left the service or took a court martial or other punishment for refusing this vaccine," said Shays. "They [Pentagon officials] have a moral obligation to allow those who were punished and those who left to come back to the military in good standing. They have an absolute moral obligation, with no escape clause, to care for those who got ill from this vaccine."

Wednesday two Connecticut Air Force Reserve majors -- Thomas Rempfer and Russell Dingle -- said the anthrax program is effectively dead. Despite now having a plentiful new supply of anthrax vaccine, the military plans instead to use antibiotics whenever they believe soldiers may have been exposed to anthrax and is developing a new vaccine, a process that could take years, said Dingle.

The veteran pilots were forced out of the Windsor Locks-based Air National Guard in January 1999 after their official inquiry recommended against the vaccine's use here. The Pentagon has expressed doubts for months about continuing the program.

"The soldiers did not want to take the vaccine because it originated from a plant that was shut down by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration," said Rempfer. "The newest label for the vaccine shows it has 175 times greater an adverse reaction rate than the rate on the old label the soldiers relied upon when they first took the shots," he said.

Blumenthal's recommendation to reconsider decisions that led to forcing Dingle, Rempfer and others out of the Guard was rejected months ago. "The most recent [Pentagon] moves certainly reinforce all of the critical comments about the vaccine and the need to revisit the unfairness of some of the decisions to punish certain personnel," Blumenthal said Wednesday.

The Pentagon announced Wednesday an even more limited use of the vaccine only for designated special mission units and manufacturing, military and research personnel. Col. Randy Randolph, a Pentagon spokesman, said the department "is still considering its options pending a potential [anthrax vaccine] policy change."

"Military and civilian judges uniformly have found orders for members to be vaccinated to be lawful orders," said another Pentagon spokesman, James Turner. "We expect service members to comply with lawful orders ... as for any other mandatory vaccination."

In April, Shays and U.S. Reps. Benjamin Gilman, R-New York, and Dan Burton, R-Indiana, wrote Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld to urge once again a halt in the vaccine program. The anthrax vaccine, they told Rumsfeld, "may cause chronic autoimmune disorders, birth defects, miscarriages and infertility."

Only 528,000 service members out of 2.4 million have been vaccinated, and not all have received all the necessary doses and booster shots.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.
Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.