

# Los Angeles Times

## Gulf War Syndrome Revisited

*Jia-Rui Chong / Los Angeles Times*

(March 11, 2008) — The federal government has at long last gotten around to acknowledging that the mysterious ailment afflicting hundreds of thousands of veterans of the first Gulf War most likely had a physical, not a mental, cause. The new findings must come as a consolation to many veterans but will leave them asking why research into a cure has been so long delayed.

The findings are also a vindication for researchers who stubbornly rejected the findings of a presidential panel that in 1998 determined that the bundle of symptoms associated with Gulf War Syndrome (GWS) most likely represented a reaction to stress. A number of researchers at the time pointed instead to a combination of chemical exposures as the most likely cause.

Now a study conducted for the Department of Veterans Affairs Research Advisory Council on Gulf War Veterans Illnesses agrees with those researchers who pointed to anti-nerve gas pills, exposure to pesticides and exposure to very low doses of the nerve gas sarin inadvertently released into the atmosphere by the destruction of Iraqi munitions just after the 1991 Gulf War. All contained chemicals called acetylcholinesterase inhibitors.

The study "thoroughly, conclusively shows that this class of chemicals actually are a cause of illness in Gulf War veterans," author Dr. Beatrice Golomb told the Los Angeles Times. An associate professor of medicine at the University of California San Diego, Dr. Golomb reviewed numerous studies, including ones of Japanese exposed to a sarin attack in Tokyo and farm workers exposed to pesticides. She found that victims exhibiting the physical symptoms of Gulf War Syndrome-type poisoning tend to share an enzyme deficiency that makes them more susceptible to the chemicals.

The government's long-standing view that GWS was not a unique illness but was caused by stress is described by epidemiologist Robert Haley of the University of Texas as "a 10-year misadventure." Dr. Haley, with funding from Ross Perot, was one of the first researchers to argue that GWS likely had a chemical cause. In an interview with *New Scientist* magazine he said questionnaires used by the Pentagon and VA to survey veterans of the First Gulf War were designed to screen for stress, not to identify physical illness. The questionnaires failed to explore the severity of symptoms suffered by veterans, he said.

Dr. Golomb's findings have been questioned by other medical experts, but cannot be easily dismissed. She found that 18 of 21 epidemiological studies of chronic health problems in Gulf War veterans showed a connection to at least one kind of acetylcholinesterase inhibitor exposure.

Other researchers told the Los Angeles Times the syndrome's symptoms are so varied that it's probably difficult to place the blame on a single cause.

Now that the finger of causality points to a chemical cause for at least some of the 250,000 cases on record, the way should be clear for seeking a cure and avoiding future exposure.