Toxic exposure in Iraq causes breast cancer

Initially denied, DAV gets Air Force veteran’s condition service-connected

Dr. T. Danielle Russell is proud of her Air Force service. After she returned home, DAV was there for her when she developed cancer.

She took the vaccines the Air Force prescribed before her deployment. She drank the water the military provided in Iraq. She lived and worked where she was told. Following orders enabled her to survive her tour in Iraq, but she didn’t expect that would also lead to cancer after she returned home.

Dr. T. Danielle Russell is fighting bilateral breast cancer. She first filed a claim with the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2013, believing the cancer was connected to her military service. A VA doctor disagreed, blaming it on genes.

Russell pushed on, undergoing costly treatment. A family doctor herself, she continued helping others while battling
the cancer. One of her patients was Michael Michelotti, supervisor of DAV’s National Service Office in Montgomery, Ala.

“When Dr. Russell told me her story, that she had been told that her cancer was hereditary, I asked her about her family history,” Michelotti recounted. “I offered to help. After a little while, she accepted. We did a lot of research.”

Russell was based at a camp built on a landfill in Baghdad. Little is known about what types of waste went into that landfill before the war. During her deployment, it was also a burn pit site. Through DAV’s successful legislative efforts in 2009 and 2010, Congress agreed that exposure to burn pits’ fumes and debris was toxic and harmful to service members exposed to them. Multiple cases of veterans becoming ill and even dying because of exposure have been reported in DAV Magazine over the past decade.

Before Russell deployed in 2007, the Air Force administered to her the full series of anthrax immunization injections. Michelotti and Russell pointed to a number of credible studies that show findings of a statistical association between the anthrax vaccine and the development of multiple cysts and especially breast cancer.

Then Russell’s oncologist brought up an eye-opening study. Plastic disposable water bottles that were used on a massive scale in Iraq for all U.S. personnel contain chemicals such as bisphenol A (BPA), which can become very harmful when exposed to intense or even moderate heat over periods of time. In Iraq, pallets of water are stored and moved around the country for days or weeks before being consumed, usually left in intense heat and direct sunlight.

Plastic bottles with recycling symbol “1” are polyethylene terephthalate (PETE or PET) and are generally considered OK to use if stored out of the sun at moderate temperatures. The
plastic bottles are also not to be reused.

According to Johns Hopkins University researcher, Dr. Rolf Halden, chemicals called phthalates are sometimes added to plastics to make them flexible and less brittle.

“Phthalates are environmental contaminants that can exhibit hormone-like behavior by acting as endocrine disrupters in humans and animals,” Halden said. “If you heat up plastics, you could increase the leaching of phthalates from the containers into water and food.”

One of the most common effects is cancer, especially breast cancer.

“Of the five women I went through residency with, two of us deployed to Iraq,” Russell said. “Both of us developed breast cancer.”

After Michelotti interviewed Russell, it became apparent to him the VA’s denial in 2013 was flawed. Russell turned out to have no history of cancer in her family. She had not inherited this terrible disease; the denial was based on an inaccurate assumption.

Michelotti and Russell worked with her doctors to document these exposures, the associated risks and the oncologist’s medical opinion. But even with all the right paperwork completed, dancing with the VA claims process was not nearly over.

On Jan. 2, 2015, DAV initiated an informal claim on Russell’s behalf, preserving the effective date of her claim. Gathering evidence and medical opinions took nine months. The claim was formalized in September.

A week before Christmas, the VA told Russell it was standing by its denial, citing no “new and material” evidence was submitted sufficient enough to reopen her claim. Michelotti
was not accepting that. He immediately contacted the VA’s rating veterans service representative, the decision-maker for the claim, arguing that Russell did in fact submit new and material evidence in the form of a positive opinion from a board-certified oncologist linking her cancer to at least two in-service exposures known to cause breast cancer.

In January 2016, they submitted new documentation showing cancer metastasized to Russell’s lungs. A few days later, the VA granted 100-percent service connection for bilateral breast cancer. The VA also granted service connection for lung cancer at 100 percent.

Russell has since closed her medical practice, unable to keep up with the work while undergoing treatment. She is fighting, hoping to be included in a treatment program in Bethesda, Md.

“I think this happened for a reason. God chose me for a reason,” Russell said. “I am OK with that. I want others to know not to back off. Fight for your rights and have DAV fighting for you.

“I am grateful that DAV was there with me through this,” she continued. “Mr. Michelotti is a bulldog. He argued relentlessly, showing regulation after regulation. So well-trained, he knows all the ins and outs. I don’t want to think where we’d be without DAV’s help.”

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