

The Situation

- The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) update, “Veterans and Agent Orange,” published in 2016, noted that although the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has not found hypertension to be presumptively related to service in Vietnam, the committee reaffirmed the conclusions of previous studies that hypertension should be placed in the category of limited or suggestive evidence of association.
- The VA study, “Herbicide Exposure, Vietnam Service, and Hypertension Risk in Army Chemical Corps Veterans,” found that exposure to herbicides is “significantly associated” with the risk of hypertension, or high blood pressure, in members of the Army Chemical Corps.
- The December 2018 NASEM updated report reviewed the VA study and stated there is sufficient evidence of a relationship between hypertension, monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS), and Agent Orange exposure.
- In a March 2019 congressional hearing, the VA indicated that a decision on these presumptives could be released within 90 days. Subsequently, in a 2019 Senate hearing in September, it was noted that VA leadership, in accordance with Policy 0215, had been considering the addition of these diseases since early summer 2019. At a hearing in December 2020, VA stated they were still seeking additional evidence before they could include the diseases.

The Challenge

- VA has repeatedly stated that additional review of evidence was required to establish these diseases as presumptive to Agent Orange. In January 2020, VA Secretary Wilkie stated VA needed to wait for published reports from VA studies, although the scientific community had already provided enough significant data, studies and associations linking these four diseases to Agent Orange exposure.
- In February 2020 in a letter, seven national Veteran Service Organizations urged the President to add the presumptive diseases based on the collected scientific evidence and studies that positively associate the diseases to Agent Orange.
- In December 2020, VA advised that results of the two studies, the Vietnam Era Health Retrospective Observational Study, or VE-HEROeS, and the Vietnam Era Mortality Study, aren't expected until at least next year, and in the case of the mortality study, until mid-2021. These are the two studies Secretary Wilkie stated they needed to review before making a decision on the four presumptives.

The Solution

- Congress must enact legislation to add hypertension and GMUS to the Agent Orange presumptive disease list. The National Academy of Medicine reported the highest level of scientific association between hypertension, monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS), and Agent Orange exposure.