Orange you glad we didn’t say BPA?

By ACSH Staff — August 31, 2010

ACSH’s Jeff Stier wonders if we have failed to learn our lesson from the 9/11 Ground Zero lawsuit [1] after reading that the Department of Veterans Affairs intends to expand Agent Orange disability coverage [2] to include treatment of ischemic heart disease and Parkinson’s disease. It’s estimated the benefits expansion will cost taxpayers $42 billion over the next 10 years. Agent Orange is an herbicide used in the U.S. military chemical warfare program during the Vietnam War.

When you look at studies of the Ranch Hands, those Air Force pilots who had the most exposure, you’ll find that there were no unusual patterns of disease, but the myth continues 35 years later, says ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. At first, even though it was junk science, Agent Orange was linked to birth defects and a few other ailments. Now it’s being blamed for all kinds of chronic diseases commonly associated with age, diet, and lifestyle. It looks like anyone who fought in the Vietnam War can now qualify for disability benefits by claiming they were exposed to Agent Orange.

Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), a decorated Marine infantry officer in Vietnam, is challenging the expansion of benefits and has forced a Senate hearing on the issue, set for Sept. 23. I just want to understand the logic of how they decided this latest service connection, Webb asks. This is a helluva awkward position to be in where I’ve been an advocate all my adult life on veterans benefits. I just want to know how they got to this point.

UPDATE 9/1/2010: Just to clarify, studies of high-dose exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam war have included all veterans who might have had contact with the herbicide, not just [3] Air Force pilots.