

Opening Statement

Chairman Dan Burton

Government Reform Committee Hearing

**“Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program – What Have We
Learned?” Part II**

October 11, 2000

10:00 am

2154 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, DC

During last week's hearing, we heard from four men whose lives have been forever changed while serving in the military and taking the anthrax vaccine. Tom Collossimo, Jon Ireland, Kevin Edwards, and Joseph Jones may never fully recover from their current health conditions.

And yet, all except one of these men, who were very healthy prior to receiving the anthrax vaccine, are being told there is no evidence to prove the vaccine is connected to their illnesses. Since our hearing one of these men suffered a grand mal seizure and another fell as a result of his medical condition and required five stitches.

Major General West sat here last week and told us that several groups of experts reviewed Kevin Edwards' medical information and determined that the anthrax vaccine was not the cause of his illness. What he failed to share with the committee is that the documentation provided for the evaluation of Kevin's condition was incomplete.

Of the nine key questions on the form the Anthrax Vaccine Expert Committee evaluated, six were marked "unknown." I find it troubling that this "expert committee" would rule out the possibility that the anthrax vaccine was linked to an adverse event when they did not have information on sixty percent of the key questions.

Last week, we also heard from two individuals who lost loved ones in the last year. Nancy Rugo's sister was certain the anthrax vaccine caused her illness and impending death. Mrs. Barbara Dunn's husband worked at Bioport and received eleven anthrax vaccine shots. After each dose, he suffered an adverse reaction. The Bioport physician was so concerned about Mr. Dunn's previous reactions that the last dose he received was split in half and the halves delivered a week apart.

And yet, the Defense Department "believes" the individuals who testified last week and their loved ones, were not injured by the anthrax vaccine.

Last year, Mr. Charles Cragin testified before our National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations Subcommittee. He said that because they are volunteers, no individual who is in the Guard or Reserve was going to be subjected to any penalties. Today, we will hear from three individuals the truth of what is really happening in the field and how it is affecting military readiness.

Lieutenant Colonel Tom Heemstra was a Commander and pilot for the 163rd Fighter Squadron in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. While significantly lower numbers have been reported up the Chain of Command, Colonel Heemstra is aware of twenty-one pilots leaving the 163rd Squadron. To date, two of these pilots chose to return to the unit and were forced to take the vaccine as a show of loyalty. So far, 14 replacements have been hired. Many of these replacements require extensive training to be ready to fly the F-16.

Colonel Heemstra was grounded, forced out as Commander, and forced into retirement. All of these actions ending an exemplary twenty-year military career that began in the Air Force Academy.

Captain Dan Marohn, also an F-16 pilot in the 163rd Fighter Squadron, refused to submit to the anthrax vaccine. As a result, he was given the choice between a court-martial and an Article 15 non-judicial punishment. He was fined and threatened with a jail sentence. Many others who did not have commitments simply resigned. Others transferred to non-deployment positions to finish their time until retirement.

Pat Ross, an Air Force Academy graduate, spent sixteen years as a fighter pilot in active duty in the Air Force and three years in the Air National Guard. He was the Squadron Commander of the 172nd Fighter Squadron in Battle Creek, Michigan. The 172nd Squadron was told to take the vaccine or leave the unit. The Staff Judge Advocate told his squadron that if they refused to take the shot, they would be discharged with a 'Less than Honorable' discharge. While the deadline to take the vaccine was postponed and no pilot has yet to be ordered to take the vaccine, 15 pilots resigned or left the unit.

Because of Secretary Cohen's decision to mandate the anthrax vaccine, we have lost a substantial number of pilots and aircrew members. These pilots and aircrew members are essential to military readiness. They are the backbone of every military operation. Without our Air National Guard and Reserve, the United States military would be unable to respond to any national security threat or emergency.

The Air Force estimates that it takes about nine years and almost six million dollars to train and develop a fully qualified and experienced aviator.

The General Accounting Office is providing results of their survey of Guard and Reserve pilots and aircrew members. They learned that the adverse events for those who have taken the

vaccine were much higher than has been reported to this Committee. They learned that there is little support for a vaccine approach to biological warfare protection.

Twenty-five percent of the pilots and air crew members of the Guard and Reserve who were surveyed have transferred to another unit, left the military, or moved to inactive status. Anthrax was the main reason for one-fourth of these departures.

What is more disturbing, is that another eighteen percent of these individuals plan to leave in the next six months. Sixty-one percent of those individuals stated that the anthrax vaccine was the main reason. So, whether the Defense Department wants to admit it or not, with a potential loss of forty-three percent of our Guard and Reserve pilots and aircrew members, we have a serious readiness problem.

The written testimony provided by the Defense Department is a regurgitation of previous statements and completely ignores the topic of this hearing – readiness and retention. They state that men and women who choose to serve their country they do so in the knowledge that service is an honor. They go on to state that failure to provide protection against anthrax would be a dereliction of duty. Was the Department's failure to provide functional masks and suits a dereliction of duty? Is the Department's failure to fully inform the troops of the risks and benefits of the vaccine prior to vaccination a dereliction of duty?

When under scrutiny, the Department's first action was to attack the veracity and integrity of the accusers and their data. When the men and women in our armed services – individuals who have volunteered to give their lives to protect this country if necessary- questioned Secretary Cohen's program, these men and women were portrayed by the Defense Department as malingerers. The Defense Department has insulted the honor and integrity of anyone who has dared question the anthrax vaccine program. We have had numerous Air Force Academy graduates testify before this Committee. I wonder how many malingerers manage to graduate from the Air Force Academy?

It is clear that the anthrax vaccine program is the wrong approach to protecting our troops. We will hear today from Dr. Stephen Porter, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Virtual Drug Development, Incorporated. He will offer another approach to providing force protection – a pre-exposure antibiotic.

It is important that the Defense Department aggressively develop other means to protect our forces. We need functional

protective suits and masks that are not defective and that will offer real protection for both biological and chemical threats. We need effective detection equipment. And our strongest protection against anthrax or any other biological and chemical threat is a strong defense ready to respond to any threat or emergency.

The hearing record will remain open until October 25.

I now recognize the ranking minority member, Mr. Waxman, for his opening statement.