

UK inquiry opened into human trials of biological and chemical weapons

UK police are investigating allegations made by a former Royal Air Force (RAF) serviceman that experiments at Porton Down Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment in which he participated left him with a long-term debilitating illness.

Gordon Bell attributes his injuries directly to the experiments, and is reported to have welcomed the Wiltshire Police's decision to investigate his claims.

Bell is also reported to have uncovered evidence of the death of a RAF colleague, 20-year-old Ronald Maddison, on May 6, 1953, during a trial with sarin. It is claimed that Maddison, who had respiratory protection throughout the trial, had 200 mg of sarin dripped onto two layers of clothing on his forearm.

In an interview on the BBC's *Today* radio programme on Aug 20, the technical director at Porton Down, Rick Hall said that "the death was subject to a coroner's inquest at the time and also to the court of inquiry by the Ministry of Supply Although

these documents have not been published, the essential details of the death have appeared in the press many times since 1953".

No winners in war

Hall denied that the UK was still involved in developing chemical weapons, and stated that volunteers currently helping at Porton Down knew what they were volunteering for. Bell has claimed he did not know that the tests he was involved in during the 1950s were part of chemical and biological warfare experiments.

Michael Roach, chairman of the

Porton Down Volunteers Association, and a former Royal Engineer, was also involved in human trials at Porton Down: "The first time I was exposed to mustard gas, and the second time was nerve gas which I inhaled directly into the lungs". Roach says he knowingly volunteered for trials at Porton Down in 1962 and 1963 "out of a sense of patriotism"—only 2-3% of his association claim to have thought the tests they were involved in were for the common cold.

But Roach says "we were told to expect minor temporary discomfort. Never was it once mentioned to anybody or put in writing . . . that there would be any possibility of long-term health effects. I haven't worked for 10 years because of breathing problems", he added.

In a statement the Ministry of Defence said they "will offer every assistance to the investigation and open all archive material to the Wiltshire Police".

Haroon Ashraf

New Zealand court allows national blood samples to be used in civil trial

A paternity case in New Zealand has raised controversy about a little-known national bank of heel-prick blood samples collected from all newborn infants since 1969. The tests check for seven disorders and are then stored at the National Testing Centre (NTC) in Auckland.

The controversy surrounds the use of the stored tests in a civil case—the first time this has been permitted. In the case, the baby had died and the mother did not want the results of a DNA blood test—which proved paternity—to be used in the court. The blood test had been approved by a High Court order, but the women said that she had not known her baby's blood was

being stored and never gave her consent for this to happen.

In the High Court, Justice Morris rejected arguments from the lawyer acting for the baby's mother that to allow the evidence to be admitted in the case would be contrary to public policy and would set a dangerous precedent. Instead, Justice Morris described the case as being "strictly between the parties".

Currently, New Zealand police have legal access to the national bank's blood tests for criminal cases. In a current murder trial, DNA from the stored blood of one of the murder victims—whose bodies were never found—was matched to a single hair found

on the accused's boat.

A prominent civil-liberties lawyer Barry Wilson has questioned the indefinite retention of the samples, describing them as a "blood bank of the nation's children". Dianne Webster, manger of the NTC said the samples were kept for quality assurance purposes.

The Privacy Commissioner Bruce Slane said he will hold an inquiry that an inquiry into the issues surrounding the retention and use of the blood samples, and the Health and Disability Commissioner says she will cooperate with investigation.

Sandra Coney

Inmates in Irish prisons face drug abuse and disease

At least 20% of inmates in Irish prisons who inject drugs say they began injecting while in custody, according to a report by the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform in Dublin, Ireland, on Aug 19.

The report, conducted by the Department of Community Health and General Practice at Trinity College, Dublin, was commissioned

to investigate the levels of HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C in prisons. The study involved nine institutions and found that more than a third of the prisoners had hepatitis C.

Infection rates were highest among drug abusing inmates: 19% had hepatitis B, 81% had hepatitis C, and 4% had HIV. Over half the respondents reported opiate use and 43%, 60% of whom were women, said they

had injected drugs. According to the report, drug abuse equipment was shared by 58% of inmates injecting drugs. Some prisoners said they did not want to be tested for diseases because they believed they would be interrogated rather than counselled.

The Prison Service has welcomed the report.

Karen Birchard