

Nuclear Free Local Authorities briefing



Date: 13 February 2003

No. 29

Subject: **British Nuclear Test Veterans**

Introduction

The NFLA Steering Committee meeting on 17 January 2003 received a paper about the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association's campaign to persuade the Ministry of Defence to accept responsibility for, and compensate for, diseases likely to have been caused by exposures to atmospheric nuclear weapon test explosions in the 1950s and 1960s.

Background

3 October 2002 was the 50th anniversary of the first British nuclear test in Maralinga, south Australia. More than 21,000 members of the British Armed Forces watched a further 45 tests carried out by Britain and the United States in Australia and the Pacific between 1952 and 1962. Many veterans believe the cancers and diseases they *and their offspring* now endure, and that prematurely took the lives of many fellow servicemen, result from exposure to radiation spread by atmospheric nuclear weapons tests.

The Maralinga anniversary was an opportunity for the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA) to publicise its campaign for justice and compensation for its members.

Issues

On 6 October the Sunday Mirror newspaper published over 10 pages dedicated to the cause of the BNTVA. They had commissioned research by the statistician John Urquhart, Newcastle University, to look at the health of 300 veterans' grandchildren.

5. Urquhart's findings included the following:

- Veterans' grandchildren were 8 times more likely to be born with Downs syndrome than children in the population as a whole.
- Rates of leukaemia were 30 times higher in children of nuclear test veterans than in the population as a whole
- Rates of general birth defects in children of test veterans were 26 times higher than in the population as a whole.

The Sunday Mirror campaign has a number of aims –

- to publicise the ongoing BNTVA campaign for an admission by the MOD that the health of veterans has been affected by exposure to radiation.



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- to provide adequate compensation to veterans and future generations who experience health problems associated with radiation exposure.
- to publicise the Urquhart evidence and seek an independent review of the veterans and their children and grandchildren's health.
- to establish a cross party campaign in Parliament to lobby the government for a full independent inquiry of the treatment of British nuclear test veterans.

Over 200 veterans and families took the campaign to Parliament on 25 November with a rally. Presentations were given by Richard Stott of the Sunday Mirror, Dr John Large, a nuclear expert, John Urquhart, Lord Jack Ashley and John Lowe, Chair of BNTVA. Dr Ian Gibson, MP for Norwich North, chaired the meeting.

An adjournment debate on the veterans was tabled by the Labour MP Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) on 4 December. Support in the debate from the veterans came from politicians from all 3 main political parties. The Defence Minister, Lewis Moonie, reiterated the Government position that National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) studies in 1988 and 1993 showed conclusively that participation in atomic tests had no detectable effect on developing cancers in later life. The debate was disappointing in that Dr Moonie was not drawn on the evidence of the Urquhart study.

Suggested Action

NFLA member councils could assist BNTVA members living in their areas by supporting the following actions endorsed by the NFLA Steering Committee meeting on 17 January 2003:

- contacting Dr Ian Gibson MP and other supportive MPs and requesting from them advice about further action that can be undertaken.
- writing to the MOD seeking an independent study of veteran's children and grandchildren to assess whether their health has been affected in any significant way.
- contacting John Urquhart, John Large and Sue Rabbitt-Roff (Dundee University) to ascertain what further scientific studies can be made to assist the case of BNTVA.
- submitting to Council resolutions asking for support for the BNTVA's campaign for recognition, justice and compensation.
- reporting the actions of other governments (e.g. the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) that have shown greater preparedness to accept responsibility for the suffering of their service men and women as a result of exposures to atmospheric nuclear weapons testing through the payment of compensation
- urging the NRPB to undertake a wider health study of test veterans. Studies undertaken to date have only reviewed reported cause of death (by reference to death certificates), and the MOD to date has refused to publish other research that it claims shows no significant health effects for veterans.
- holding an event to publicise the BNTVA's campaign.

For further information and assistance with any of the above matters contact:
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